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THE PILOT OF THE WOODS

OR, THE CROOKED TRAIL.

A Story of the Northwest Woods.

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AUTHOR OF "BLACK BUCKSKIN," "KENNETH,
THE KNIFE KING," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

A BALMY day in early summer was drawing to a close, and the setting sun, sinking from sight in all its golden splendor, sent down its farewell rays upon the flower-bedecked prairie of western Iowa.

An undulating plain spread out in every direction as far as the eye could reach, relieved here and there by scattered groves of timber.

LITTLE LIGHTFOOT DODGED TO THE SHELTER OF A BIG TREE, AND FROM ITS COVER STUDIED THE SCENE BEFORE HIM.

Winding through the tall grass like some huge serpent, a wagon-train crept slowly along.

Three of the long-canvas-topped vehicles known as "prairie-schooners," each drawn by a pair of spirited horses, made up the train, which was an unusually small one to be crossing the wild, Sioux-infested plains of the then territory of Iowa, but the little handful of men who trudged tirelessly along beside the teams, from the tall, gray-bearded man of commanding appearance, who appeared to be the leader, down to the grinning darky who guided the horses, were brave and wary tands of the right stamp to undertake such a perilous journey.

Another thing that characterized this particular party was the fact that, with a single exception, the gentler sex was conspicuous for its absence; its only representative rode in state, perched upon the high spring-seat of one of the vehicles.

Scarcely nineteen, with the grace and suppleness of a fawn, clear, regular features, sparkling eyes, and a wealth of nut-brown hair that blew unconfined about her neck and shoulders—such was the maiden who rejoiced in the admiration and esteem of every man belonging to the train.

Especially so in the case of the tall, handsome young man who strode along by the side of her wagon; they seemed to take delight in one another's company, and it was not very difficult, to perceive that the youth looked upon the girl with feelings of more than ordinary admiration.

That Guy Garland was different from his companions could be seen at a glance; an artist by profession, plenty of money at his disposal, he had sought to improve his health, as well as to gratify his inordinate love of adventure, by a summer ramble in the West. With this end in view, he had joined the party with whom we now find him.

Frank and noble, brave, yet discreet, a perfect athlete and crack shot with the rifle or pistol, young Garland proved no inferior companion for these hardy bordermen, by whom he was universally liked.

At the time we introduce the young couple to the reader, Louise Lester was chatting gayly with her companion, pointing out various objects of interest; but it was noticeable that, though Guy smilingly responded to her vivacious remarks, his smile was forced, and his handsome face wore a look of anxiety that he could but partially conceal.

Nor was he alone in this; that troubled expression was visible upon the countenance of every man in the party, excepting Ebony Dick, for it was doubtful if anything but mirth was ever portrayed upon his sable visage.

What was the cause of this apparent uneasiness among the travelers? A few words will explain.

Philip Lester, the leader of the company, had recently settled at a post on the Iowa frontier, and was now on his way there from the East, whither he had been to get his daughter, Louise, who had remained in the care of an aunt since the death of her mother several years before. The girl, who was of a restless, venturesome disposition, chafing under the restraints of society, hailed with delight the change in prospect, and the perilous journey over the prairie was begun with every one in the best of spirits.

Lester's party was a small one, but he had the satisfaction of knowing that every man who composed it possessed courage that could be relied on in case of necessity; under the guidance of a noted scout and Indian-fighter, he was confident that the manifold dangers attending the journey would be successfully avoided, and their destination be ultimately reached in safety.

Everything went well until the day prior to the opening of our story.

Early in the afternoon Sam Cole, the guide, had left the train, for the double purpose of making a reconnaissance and to obtain some fresh meat, if possible, for the company. The latter were to keep on their way, so as to lose no time, with the understanding that Sam was to join them by dark.

Night came, but the scout did not; and the party awaited his arrival with constantly-increasing anxiety. Morning dawned, but the scout did not put in his appearance, and a party was sent in search of him.

The result was that the trail of the guide was found to terminate at the brink of a cavity in the plain—a freak of nature by no means uncommon in that section, through which, far below the surface of the prairie, flowed a deep and narrow stream. The supposition was, therefore, that the scout had come upon this place un-

aware, to meet his death upon the rocks at the bottom of the chasm.

There was no way of descending to verify their theory, so the party returned to their companions with their sad story. A council was held, and it was determined to keep on, trusting to Providence to reach their destination, which could now be but a comparatively short distance away.

Accordingly, the train was again put in motion, though the men were not without their misgivings.

The dullest man among them all fully realized the hazard attending a journey, without a guide, thro' a country that was then the favorite hunting-ground of the fiercest of Northwestern tribes—the Sioux.

Fortunately, none of these copper-skinned lords of the prairie had yet been encountered, but they were liable to come in sight at any moment.

Thus the hours dragged away, as the plucky little party tramped determinedly along; but in their hearts was a presentiment that they were off the proper course, and the feeling of uneasiness was steadily increasing.

Finally, just as the sun was sinking in the western heavens, Philip Lester called a halt.

"There's no use in going further to-night, friends," he declared. "It's plain to me that we're off the track, and the prospect is by no means inviting. However, there's no way but to trust to luck and an all-wise Providence, unless we take the back track, and have all our previous journey for nothing."

This, however, the travelers were unanimously against; they had rather brave the dangers incurred by advancing.

Gloomy and despondent, they clustered about the leader. Fair Louise, too, was silent, for she divined from the many grave looks that something was the matter, though she knew not the true condition of affairs; even the sable face of the volatile African was destitute of its customary grin.

Such was the situation when Guy Garland suddenly uttered a low cry, as he pointed out over the plain—a cry that was echoed by his companions, as they looked in the direction indicated.

Upon the crest of a swell in the prairie, directly between them and the setting sun, his weapons and accouterments gleaming like burnished silver under the descending rays, a single horseman sat coolly surveying the wagon-train.

Was he red or white?—friend or foe?

Even as the astonished travelers asked themselves these questions, the subject of their remarks, the first human being they had seen since passing the Des Moines, descended the slope and rode toward them at a rapid gallop.

He was soon near enough for the friends to determine that he was a white man, and friendly, judging from the fearless manner in which he approached.

The party watched his advance with interest, and ten minutes later, the stranger drew rein beside them.

He was a man of middle age, tall and muscular, with the arms and chest of a gladiator; a mass of coal-black hair, partially confined by a battered slouch hat, fell about his neck and shoulders, while a heavy beard, black as the raven's wing, concealed most of his face; a pair of keen, flashing eyes looked down upon the men of the train. This individual was attired in a neat but well-worn suit of buckskin, and, in addition to the rifle slung upon his back, he carried a belt holding knives and pistols.

Such was the appearance of the man who rode coolly up to the train, mounted on a large and powerful mustang, his eagle eye taking in the surroundings at a single glance.

"Who is in command here?" he demanded in a loud, though not unpleasant, voice.

Philip Lester stepped forward.

"I am in charge of this train," he answered.

"Whom do I have the honor of addressing?"

"I am known in these hyar parts as Iowa Jack, scout an' Injun-fighter, at your service. Pr'aps you've heard tell o' me," rejoined the stranger, carelessly.

The faces of the travelers brightened.

Most of them had heard of the plainsman, though none had ever met him. He was said to know the surrounding country like a book, and, of course, could guide them to their destination.

"If you are Iowa Jack, you are doubly welcome," declared Philip Lester, warmly, as he grasped the hand of the new-comer, "for you are just the person to aid us in our difficulty."

The man nodded.

"Where are you bound, pard?" he inquired.

"The settlement of Eagle Bluffs is our destination, but we have lost our guide, and, being unacquainted with the country, I fear we are a little out of the proper course."

"Slightly, yes!" assented the scout, laughing. "Eagle Bluffs lays yonder."

He pointed in a direction almost at right angles with the course the train had been pursuing.

"I tho't you war in difficulty o' some kind, when I see yer haltin' hyar," Iowa Jack went on. "It's lucky I see yer, too, for a pack o' reds are camped over yonder, 'bout five miles from hyar, an' you'd run smack inter 'em if you'd kept on. But, how did you happen to lose yer guide?"

Lester explained about the disappearance of Sam Cole. The scout listened in silence, and no one observed the peculiar smile that for a moment flitted over his bearded face.

When Lester had finished, Iowa Jack signified his readiness to pilot the party to Eagle Bluffs, and it is needless to say that the rejoicing travelers accepted his services.

Acting upon the advice of the scout, Lester changed the course of the train, and they again started, for, a mile away, Iowa Jack stated, was an excellent spot to spend the night, with wood and water in abundance.

They pushed forward as rapidly as possible, the spirits of the travelers having risen wonderfully since the coming of the borderman.

There was one among their number, however, who was not exactly pleased at the turn affairs had taken.

It was Guy Garland, who had taken a sudden dislike to the new-comer. There was a look in the sharp eyes of the scout which he did not like, nor was he pleased by the frequent gloating glances that Iowa Jack bestowed upon the young girl in the wagon.

However, Guy did not feel justified to say anything; his companions all placed the most explicit trust in the stalwart stranger, and the young man deemed it wise to hold his peace, though something prompted him to keep his eye on the new guide.

Just before they reached the camping-place, young Garland made a discovery.

Iowa Jack happened to ride close to Guy, and the young man's attention was attracted to a ring that glistened upon the finger of the guide.

A low cry escaped him.

Unless his eyes greatly deceived him, he had seen that same ring upon the finger of Sam Cole, the missing scout!

CHAPTER II.

THE BOY RANGER.

"THIS is the forest primeval." Large trees of various varieties tower on every hand, interlaced with a thicket of shrubs and tangled vines and briars, while fallen trees and, here and there, a huge rock, combine to render locomotion exceedingly difficult.

Here, in the center of the vast grove, is a small glade or open spot, covered with a carpet of rich grass, which is nourished by the spring of clear, cold water that bubbles up close by.

Beside this spring, one afternoon, a youth in the buckskin garb of a trapper was kneeling, partaking of the delicious liquid.

He was scarcely eighteen, and of medium size, but his frame, though small, was well-knit and wiry, and it was evident that he was not lacking in physical strength.

His face was handsome, and glowing with health, though bronzed by exposure to wind and sun, while a pair of sparkling brown eyes flashed from beneath their lashes.

His buckskin suit was well-worn but neat, and the sleeves and leggings were tastefully ornamented with beads and fringe. Beaded Indian moccasins covered his feet, while a cap of coonskin, with the tail left on, gave its wearer a jaunty appearance.

The youth was well-armed. A brace of pistols and a hunting-knife were supported by the belt around his waist, in addition to a light rifle that lay on the grass by his side.

The young trapper seemed to appreciate the fountain, for he drank long and deep. Thus busily engaged, he paid no attention to what was transpiring in his immediate vicinity.

Suddenly the plumed head of an Indian warrior was protruded from the thicket in the rear, and a pair of snaky eyes glared fiercely out upon the youth.

Little by little the body followed, until a stalwart brave in war-paint and feathers, clutching in one hand a murderous-looking scalping-knife, stood revealed.

Deadly danger lurked behind the young ranger, but he was all unconscious of the proximity of his foe.

Dropping upon his hands and knees, the Sioux stealthily advanced.

With the noiselessness of a panther he crept forward, his painted visage glowing with anticipated triumph, his basilisk-like orbs never for an instant leaving his intended victim.

The youth at the spring raised his head, and his hand sought his belt.

The red-skin thinking that his presence was discovered, was about to spring forward, but the young scout again assumed his former position, gazing abstractedly into the clear waters.

Again the Sioux advanced. His intention was to get as near as possible to his victim, that his work might be swift and sure.

He was close upon the white youth, now, and in another moment the keen blade would be buried in the boy's back, when—the form of the young ranger straightened; his arm was suddenly uplifted; there was a flash, as a bright object rapidly cleft the air, and the Sioux warrior rolled to the earth with a gurgling cry, a keen blade literally buried in his bosom.

The ranger had seen the image of the approaching red-skin reflected in the pellucid waters of the spring, and had coolly waited until he was within reach.

With a triumphant cry, the boy leaped to his feet, as he noted the success of his knife-throw.

The savage's career was ended, and his life-blood was rapidly dyeing the green carpet of the glade.

"That wasn't bad fur a back throw," muttered the youth, as he coolly withdrew his knife from its now gory sheath, and wiped it on the grass. "Plumb through the heart, sure's my handle's Little Lightfoot. Ugh! This is a pesky mean bizness, but ther varmint would ha' knifed me, sure as preachin', if I hadn't turned the tables on him. Hello!"

An arrow whizzed by dangerously close to his head, and lodged in the trunk of a tree behind him.

At the same moment, half-a-dozen savages leaped from the thicket, and darted toward him, filling the air with their vengeful cries.

"Lightfoot, Wood Pilot as ye ar', you've got to git out o' this," was the boy's laconic conclusion, and, snatching his rifle, he darted into the forest like a deer, with his foes in hot pursuit.

Now it was that the extraordinary agility of the young ranger was made manifest. He darted between trees and through thickets, bounding over rocks and logs in a manner that showed that his *sobriquet* was aptly applied; he was as light and fleet of foot as a deer.

He was soon out of sight of his enemies, but from the crashing of the undergrowth in the rear, he knew that they were after him, to the death; whereat he smiled grimly.

"Let 'em come!" he muttered. "Ef they catch me, then they're smarter than I think. I reckon I know these woods 'bout as well's they do."

Firmly grasping his rifle, the young borderer dashed on, yet was husbanding his strength for a future effort.

Soon a point was reached where the woods were more open and the ground better adapted to running.

Little Lightfoot cast a hasty glance behind him.

"Now for a spurt!" he muttered.

Away he went at increased speed, running with a swiftness that was truly astonishing.

For half a mile he fairly flew over the rough ground, keeping straight as an arrow on his course; then he made an abrupt turn, and dashed off in another direction.

Again and again he changed his course, doubling and twisting through the forest, never for an instant abating his speed, until at length he stopped abruptly, and throwing himself upon the ground, listened attentively with his ear pressed to the earth.

Not a sound from his pursuers was to be heard.

The cunning youth had thrown the wily Sioux completely off the trail.

The Wood Pilot waited some time to convince himself that such was indeed the case; then he shouldered his rifle and glided off through the forest, chuckling at the clever way in which he had outwitted his enemies.

"Something's in the wind," the youth told himself, as he walked along. "Ten hours ago thar wa'n't a varmint within a dozen miles of hyar; now they're thicker'n bumble-bees. I don't understand it."

For half an hour the boy walked swiftly ahead, arriving at last to where the woods sud-

denly terminated upon a high bluff, overlooking a broad, deep stream.

It was a peculiar spot. On one side of the river this rocky bluff rose up, its precipitous side covered with clinging vines, until it seemed a solid wall of green; on the opposite side of the stream extended a level meadow, covered with rich grass and dotted here and there with clumps of trees.

The two sides of the stream presented a striking contrast; but it was not the peculiarity of the region that attracted the attention of the young ranger, for he had stood on this same spot scores of times before.

There was something upon the opposite shore that did not belong there, and after a first rapid glance, Little Lightfoot dodged to the shelter of a big tree, and from its cover studied the scene before him.

What he saw was a large fire, showing plainly in the fast-deepening darkness; it was kindled in a small grove of cottonwoods, two hundred yards from the shore, and by its bright light the youth could distinguish the forms of over two-score of red-skins, gathered around the blaze.

The boy gave vent to a low murmur of surprise.

"Thunder!" he ejaculated. "What'll open out next? Half a hundred Injun's in war-paint an' feathers! That means work for you, Lightfoot!"

He took a long look at the shadowy forms of the red-skins.

"That's White Rattlesnake's band, I'll bet a dollar!" he declared, after a critical survey. "I kin tell that imp's fancy dress fur as I kin see it. Lightnin' strike the varmint! He's more hurt to the settlers than the rest of the cut-throat tribe. *Wouldn't* I like ter have a good squar' bead on his ugly pictur!" and dropping to the ground, the Pilot of the Woods crept forward, concealed by the tall grass that grew to the very edge of the bluff. Thus the young ranger continued to attentively regard the party below.

Their presence was an indication of mischief of some sort, for White Rattlesnake, the scourge of the northwestern frontier, never left his village, which lay some distance to the west, along the north branch of the Platte, unless there was an excellent prospect of reaping a harvest of plunder and scalps, in the Iowa settlements.

But the object of their presence there was what puzzled the scout.

There was no settlement in the vicinity to attack, and the spot was considerably out of the customary course of emigrant-trains.

Still, the red-skins must have some purpose in view, and the Wood Pilot determined to learn what it was. That was his duty, plainly.

"The infernal imps are up to some devilry," he soliloquized, "an' it's my bizness ter scout 'round, an' bluff their leetle game, if I kin. Reckon I'll go over an' call on the catamounts an' see if I can't pick up a point er two."

Reckless though this plan might be, the young ranger meant what he said.

It would not be the first time, by any means, that he had prowled about a red-skin camp.

But Fate willed that Lightfoot should not put his scheme into execution.

As he lay there, flat on his stomach, intently watching the Indian encampment, he was startled by the sharp crackling of a dry stick close behind him, and turning from his intent observation ahead, the youth beheld a painted brave in the very act of springing upon him!

Lightfoot was in a very unpleasant predicament, for, owing to his position, he was unable to rise in time to avoid the danger that threatened him.

But his usual presence of mind did not desert him, and, like a flash, he rolled over and over.

This movement saved his life, for the next instant the knife of the savage came down, driven with all the strength of the brawny arm, striking the earth where the youth's body had been a second before.

The force of the blow knocked the weapon from the red-skin's hand, but the latter, with a grunt of mingled anger and disgust at his bad luck, grappled his intended victim before he could escape.

Lightfoot saw that he was in for a hand-to-hand struggle, and, undaunted, grappled fiercely with his foe.

The Sioux was a large, burly fellow, but the young ranger made up in agility what he lacked in brute force, and his red antagonist soon found that he had caught a Tartar.

Over and over upon the grass they rolled, first one uppermost, then the other, writhing, twisting, panting, tugging, neither appearing to gain any advantage.

They fought in silence. The Sioux was determined to conquer his enemy single-handed, being too proud to call his friends over the creek to his aid, as he might easily have done by one vigorous whoop.

Of course, Lightfoot made no outcry, for he realized the value of maintaining silence.

For several minutes the struggle continued with unabated violence, both fighting in grim desperation for the mastery.

But suddenly the contest took a turn that was anticipated by neither of the combatants.

In their frantic struggles, they rolled to the brink of the precipice, and went down—down! into the cold waters of the river, still wrapped in a fierce embrace.

CHAPTER III.

OVER THE CATARACT.

DOWN—down! fell the two foes, cutting the air like a bullet from a rifle, striking the water with a splash, and stopping in their downward plunge only when their feet touched the bottom of the stream.

Then, up—up! till they reached the surface, and once more breathed in the pure air of Heaven.

But through all this the two clung to each other like a couple of wasps—and the surface once reached, the combat recommenced with renewed vigor.

Fortunately for the Wood Pilot, their fall had not been witnessed, nor had the subsequent splash been heard by the Indians by the fire, who lounged on, unconscious of the exciting scene that was being enacted almost beneath their very noses.

The young ranger was the first to recover from the plunge, and he succeeded in getting one hand on the windpipe of his antagonist, effectually shutting off all loud outcry.

But the Indian retaliated by throwing his muscular arm tightly about the neck of the youth, making it difficult for him to breathe.

Thus the contest was renewed on about even terms.

They were rapidly leaving the vicinity of the Sioux camp, and the warrior, repenting of his bargain, tried to call out to his friends; but the fierce gripe of Lightfoot on his throat permitted nothing beyond an inarticulate gurgle, and the swift current soon swept them out of sight and hearing.

The river current was so rapid that the contestants had difficulty in keeping their heads above the surface; therefore their struggles were not as fierce as they had been on shore, but they threw their strength into their several gripes in a way that meant business.

Five minutes passed in ominous silence.

The Wood Pilot still clutched the throat of the red-skin, and exerted all his strength to choke him off, but the Sioux clung like grim death, and it was with the utmost difficulty, at times, that the youth saved himself from being forced under by his burly adversary.

On they rushed, borne by a current that was constantly increasing in velocity.

Trees and bushes on the shore bent and nodded like grim phantoms in the semi-darkness, seeming to mock them as they flew past.

Suddenly a low, murmuring sound broke upon the ears of the drifting foes—a sound that now increased in volume with every passing moment.

As he heard it, Lightfoot paled, brave as he was. He knew every point on the river, and the moment he heard the sounds, he knew the cause.

Below them the river, running swiftly through a narrow channel, took an abrupt fall over a high precipice into a boiling, rock-filled pool, known among the trappers in this vicinity as the Devil's Churn.

It was next to impossible for a human being to take a plunge over this cataract, down upon the jagged rocks below, and live to tell the tale; and many were the uncanny stories told concerning the place by the Indians, by whom it was held in wholesome awe and dread.

No wonder, then, that the hardy young ranger quailed, knowing as he did the dangerous character of the place upon which he was being so resistlessly driven.

His only hope was to shake off the grasp of his foe, and swim to the shore.

The roar of the cataract echoing in his ears inspired him with fresh vigor, and he made an almost superhuman effort to free himself.

In vain! Though half-choked by the sinewy fingers of the ranger, the warrior still clung to him with a grasp that was impossible to shake off.

The Sioux realized that death to him was in-

evitable, and, with savage cruelty, he was determined that his enemy should share his fate.

The Pilot of the Wood was in despair.

A plunge into the Devil's Churn seemed inevitable.

On they flew, the roar of the falls ringing in the ears of the young ranger like the knell of doom.

The current was bearing them onward with frightful velocity, and from the presence of many jagged rocks in mid-stream it was evident that they were within the rapids above the cataract.

Suddenly one of these loomed up right ahead. Lightfoot avoided it by a miracle, but the warrior was dashed violently against the rock, his skull evidently being crushed by the terrible concussion.

With a cry of joy, the boy tore himself free from the relaxed grasp of the dead savage; but his exultation was short-lived.

His release had come too late.

He was now fairly within the rapids, and, though he struggled with all his might, he found it impossible to reach the shore.

Desperately he clutched at the rocks as he flew past, but the merciless current tore him from his hold.

Realizing the uselessness of struggling longer, the brave boy ceased his efforts, and drifted passively on to his doom.

Louder and louder roared the cataract! Faster and faster flew the doomed ranger!

Rocks loomed up on every hand, but, with wonderful luck, and exceeding skill, he passed them all unscathed.

Right ahead, a wall of foam, visible in the semi-gloom, marked the position of the cataract. The critical moment was at hand.

The falls were reached, and, after being poised for an instant on the brink, the Pilot of the Wood disappeared amid the boiling waters of the Churn!

A minute later, the head of the bold young scout appeared above the foaming waters, below the pool.

His time had not yet come.

With singular good-fortune, he had struck in the only spot in the pool that was free from rocks, and rising to the surface none the worse off for his plunge, had been caught up by the current, and swept down the stream, thus escaping the powerful eddies that whirled on either side of him.

Not once in a hundred times would a man be so fortunate as to pass this dangerous point in safety, and Little Lightfoot could scarcely believe the evidence of his senses, when he found himself alive and comparatively uninjured.

The danger was not yet over, however, for threatening rocks projected on every hand, liable to crush the youth as he was carried downstream.

But, with fortune still favorable, he managed to avoid them all, and, after a hard struggle, succeeded in reaching the bank, where he lay panting and exhausted after his terrible experience.

"Jupiter!" he muttered. "That was a close call. No other chap, red or white, kin boast of goin' through Old Nick's Churn, but I wouldn't do it ag'in ef I could help it, not fer all ther gold in ther kentry. Ugh!"

As soon as he could recover his breath, which had been well-nigh knocked out of him, the boy began to look himself over to see what was missing.

Beyond a few bruises, the Wood Pilot had come out uninjured, but his cap was gone, and his pistols had been lost during the rapid transit, so that now he was left in the midst of his enemies with no weapon but his hunting-knife.

The fact of his being water-soaked added greatly to his discomfort.

"Ugh! I must be moving," exclaimed the scout, as he shivered in the cool evening air. "First, back to ther bluff to recover my rifle; then fer ther cave an' a good fire."

He glided into the woods as he spoke, but, after walking rapidly for five minutes, he came to an abrupt halt.

A faint glimmer of light through the trees ahead had met his eye.

The young ranger gave a low, astonished exclamation.

"Thunder! This are a red-letter day fur discoveries," he muttered. "Thar's anuther camp ahead, an' I'm a-goin' ter find out who occupies it. P'r'aps ther presence hyar'll explain what White Rattlesnake's imps are doin' in these diggin's."

No sooner said than done, and, dropping upon his hands and knees, the young ranger crept noiselessly toward the fire.

He reached a favorable position without betraying his presence, and looked out upon the scene before him.

It was the camp of Philip Lester and his friends, who had arrived there some two hours before, and were now making themselves comfortable for the night.

The wagons were arranged in a rude circle, in the center of which a cheerful fire was burning; around the blaze gathered the men in a state of blissful content. Louise Lester was sleeping peacefully in her wagon.

Such was the scene that greeted the eye of Lightfoot, as he looked out from his place of concealment.

A knowing expression crossed the boy's face. "Hum! I opine I smell a big mouse," he muttered. Them pesky imps up the creek know of this train, an' that's what they're layin' for, or I'm a liar. I must warn the 'tarnal fools o' their danger. Don't see what on earth they're doin' down hyar, anyway."

Without hesitation he advanced into the camp.

"Evenin', pard!" he saluted, pleasantly.

The travelers looked up in astonishment.

No noiseless had been the approach of the young ranger, that they were unaware of his presence until he spoke, and now they beheld him standing in their very midst, hatless, weaponless, and dripping from his recent voyage down the river.

The men stared as if they saw a ghost, while the Wood Ranger smiled broadly as he noted their amazement.

"Allow me ter introduce myself, gents," he said, before any one could speak. "I'm known as Little Lightfoot, the Pilot of the Woods—trapper an' ranger by perffession; an' seein' your camp-fire, I cum ter warn you that this place isn't exactly safe fer gents o' your complexion."

The travelers looked surprised.

"What do you mean, boy?" demanded Lester.

"Are we not on the right trail to Eagle Bluffs?"

"Eagle Bluffs is a place you'll never see, if you continue *this* course," declared the young borderer, promptly; "but, instead, you will make the acquaintance of a party of reds, who are this minit camped half a mile up-stream. That's what I mean!"

Lester seemed incredulous.

"You must be mistaken, my friend," he said.

"We are guided by Iowa Jack, who knows the country well, and I am confident that we are on the proper course."

"Iowa Jack!" echoed the wood ranger. "I know him well. Where is he now?"

Lester designated the guide, who was sitting half-concealed in the shadows, regarding the new-comer with glittering eyes.

A cry came from the lips of the youth, as his eyes rested upon the swarthy face, for shadowed though it was, he recognized it at a glance.

"Friends!" he called out. "Thar's a game afoot. You've been basely deceived."

The ringing tones of the ranger started every man to his feet.

"What mean you, boy?" demanded Lester, excitedly.

"Simply this: Yonder scoundrel is no more Iowa Jack than I am. He is Black Raven, the renegade, associate o' White Rattlesnake, ther Sioux, who at this minit is waitin' to scoop in this train!"

At this startling announcement, a deathlike silence fell upon the thunder-struck emigrants.

The false guide whom Lightfoot had just denounced, was the first to move.

With a hoarse curse, he leaped to his feet, drawing a pistol, and firing point-blank at the young ranger.

Lightfoot staggered back with a low cry, and fell heavily to the earth, and uttering an exultant shout, Black Raven dodged behind the wagons, and the next moment disappeared in the forest.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ISLE OF REFUGE.

PHILIP LESTER hurried to the side of the Wood Pilot just as the latter rose slowly to his feet.

"All's safe and sound, cap'n," he remarked, lightly, in response to the look of solicitude. "Only a crease on ther forehead that kinder upset me fer a minute. The rascal meant well enough, though."

Lester grasped the hand of the cool young ranger.

"We can never repay you for what you've done for us!" he cried, warmly. "But for you—"

"Go easy, pard!" interrupted Lightfoot. "Never shout until you're out o' ther woods. I've drove off that pesky imp, I'll allow, but thet don't insure you safety, not by a jug-full. Black Raven 'll strike fer ther camp ov his pard as fast as his legs 'll carry him, and this place 'll swarm with ther 'tarnal varmints afore mid-night."

"Do you think they'll attack us, then?"

"Sartain of it. The rascals hev planned cunningly ter draw you inter ther clutches, an' if they don't make one tremenjous swoop for scalps an' plunder, then I don't know 'em."

"But forewarned is forearmed. We can turn the wagons into a barricade, and give the red fiends a warm reception," said Lester.

Lightfoot shook his head decidedly.

"Not a bit of it!" he exclaimed. "There's most half a hundred ov ther varmints—enuff ter wipe out this camp, and not leave so much as a grease-spot to tell the tale. No, sir-ee! You must move!"

"But where shall we go?" anxiously asked Philip, as the settlers crowded eagerly about the young ranger, as if aware that he alone could deliver them from the threatening peril.

The Wood Pilot hesitated but a moment before replying.

"I reckon I know a place that 'll be just ther ticket," he then said. "In the river, a quarter ov a mile from hyar, is an island, well-wooded, an' a reg'lar natural fort. This spot once reached, you kin defend yourselves from ther reds without much danger o' capture. That's ther only plan I know of that's anywhere near safe, an' you mus' work lively if you hope ter reach ther island in time ter save yer skulls."

Further advice was unnecessary. The settlers instantly went to work with the energy of men who knew their lives depended upon their efforts.

Lightfoot having obtained a rifle and pistols from the train, felt more at his ease; yet his mind was by no means free from apprehensions, as he watched the movements of the excited settlers.

He knew full well that White Rattlesnake would lead his band of bloodthirsty warriors down upon the camp pell-mell, as soon as Black Raven arrived with the intelligence that his plot had been discovered.

Every moment was precious to the little band of whites, and they labored with a will.

Each man collected such provisions and other needful articles as he could conveniently carry, in addition to his weapons and ammunition, this being the wise order of the boy ranger, who temporarily assumed command of the party.

Of course there was no time to save the horses and wagons, nor the bulk of their property; these must needs be left behind to fall into the hands of the plundering Sioux.

Lester was in favor of burning them to prevent their capture, but Little Lightfoot objected emphatically, for the blaze would serve as a beacon for the savages, and enable them to reach the spot much quicker.

So prompt were the settlers, that in ten minutes after the hasty departure of the renegade, they, too, were in readiness to leave the camp.

Under the guidance of the young ranger, they set out through the forest for their haven of safety, breathing more freely with each step that carried them further from their dreaded foes.

The strong arm of Guy Garland supported the form of the settler's fair daughter, whose fear and bewilderment at thus being suddenly awakened from slumber to tramp through the woods, can easily be imagined.

But she bore herself bravely, uttering no word of complaint.

The Wood Pilot unhesitatingly led the way, and soon brought the party out on the bank of the river, at a point about half a mile below the cataract, the roar of which could still be faintly heard.

The stream, which now was calm and deep, widened considerably at this point, forming a small lake, in the center of which was the island Little Lightfoot designed to reach.

Reaching the shore, the young scout, after a brief search among the reeds and bushes at the water's edge, drew out a large birch canoe capable of seating several persons.

"I'll have to make several trips, fer ther boat won't hold you all," explained the youth, as he launched the craft. "Tumble in, quick, four of you. There's no time to lose."

Young Garland entered the craft with Louise, followed by two of the men, and Lightfoot pushed off.

Five minutes of active paddling brought them to the island, and the young borderer, landing

his passengers, quickly returned to where his friends were anxiously awaiting him.

Scarcely had the boat put off with its second load, when a chorus of shrill yells from the forest rung out with startling distinctness upon the still night air.

The settlers well knew their meaning; the Sioux had reached the deserted camp!

The sounds lent fresh strength to the arm of Little Lightfoot, for he knew that the red-skins would immediately follow their trail, and Philip Lester and three of his men still remained on the shore.

While they remained there, they were in deadly peril, and the youth made all haste to empty his craft and put back to their rescue.

Propelled by his muscular arm, the canoe fairly flew over the water; and there was ample need of haste.

The savages were rapidly approaching the shore, making their coming manifest by continuous whoops and yells, until it seemed as if Pandemonium was let loose in the forest.

It was a race for the shore between Little Lightfoot and the Indians, though the latter were unaware of what was taking place on the river, and the ranger won.

A shout of joy went up from the anxious men on the bank, as the youth arrived with the canoe.

"Jump in!" yelled Lightfoot, excitedly. "Lively, now! The red imps are close on us."

The settlers obeyed with such precipitation that the frail craft tipped to one side, and threatened to capsize.

The ranger succeeded in righting it, however, just as the savages burst into sight; at sight of the whites, they came tearing down the bank like a pack of fiends.

"Give 'em a volley, pard! Pepper 'em!" yelled the Pilot, as he swept the boat away from the shore with a powerful stroke of the paddle.

Lester and his friends were prompt to respond, and the reports of four rifles, blended as one, mingled with the cries of the infuriated red-men.

The savages replied with whoops and a cloud of arrows, but the latter proved as harmless as the former, no one being injured, though some of the missiles whizzed dangerously close.

Undaunted by the cloud of arrows that hurtled by his head, Lightfoot plied his paddle energetically, and before another volley came, had the satisfaction of placing the craft some distance from the shore, where they were in comparative safety.

Having no canoes, the red-skins made no attempt to follow, contenting themselves with yelling their disapprobation of affairs from the shore.

The Wood Pilot now paddled leisurely to the Isle, and the party was again united.

It was now nearly midnight, but the moon shone brightly, enabling them to see their surroundings almost as plainly as in daylight.

The island comprised a small tract of rocks and sand, the former interlaced with bushes and briars, with here and there a stunted tree.

A cheerless, barren spot, yet it was just the place for the purpose of the whites; the many rocks could be utilized in forming a rude fort, behind which to repel the attacks of the red-skins. On the whole, no better spot could be found in the vicinity.

On arriving at the island, Lester made the discovery that one of their number was missing.

It was Ebony Dick, who had in some unaccountable manner been left behind.

Dick had been a great favorite with the party, and every man was deeply affected by his loss.

There was a possibility, to be sure, that the negro had escaped unharmed, but the probability was that the poor fellow's scalp was at that moment dangling at the girdle of some painted brute.

Their own position, however, was enough to engross the thoughts of the settlers, and they at once proceeded to discuss the situation.

Little Lightfoot was looked to for advice, for his work that night had proved to them that, though but a boy in years, the young ranger carried the head of a veteran upon his shoulders.

If human being could pilot them out of danger, Lightfoot was the one, was the conviction of Philip Lester, who had been strongly attracted to the young borderer.

"Is there any danger of an attack to-night, think you?" inquired Lester, as the party gathered about the fire, which had been kindled under the lee of a large boulder.

"No," answered the boy, decidedly; "they'll not attack to-night, for two reasons. First, they wouldn't attack without canoes, an' not havin' any, they'll hev ter build some; second, they think they have us boxed up hyar, an' they won't bother their pates much about us as long 's thar's anything left in them wagons worth fightin' over."

"Then," spoke up one of the party, "what's ter prevent us from crossin' over ter the other side an' makin' off fur the settlement, while the reds are carousing over their plunder?"

The young wood ranger turned a half-contemptuous look upon the speaker.

"Thar's reason enuff why we shouldn't make sich blamed fools o' ourselves!" he retorted. "Ten to one, ther red-skins suspect such a move, an' have got a scout on ther watch. We'd all get our skulps yanked off afore we war hardly started. No, sir-ee. You must stay here, if you want ter save your ha'r. You hear me!"

"Then you think that we are in comparative safety where we are?" remarked Philip Lester, as the luckless settler relapsed into silence.

The boy nodded.

"Safe on conditions," he said. "The red-skins won't make a move afore to-morrow, anyway, an' probably not until dark ag'in. That'll give us plenty o' time to prepare for 'em. We kin build up a wall o' stone right hyar in ther middle o' ther island, to shelter us from their arrers; an' from behind it we kin command the water on all sides. I reckon thar's enough ov us hyar to keep the varmints from landin', unless they get reinforcements. The biggest danger will be in gettin' out of grub. If ther p'ison imps should hang around till our victuals are all gone, we'll hev ther choice o' starvation or surrender."

"I would rather starve a thousand times than to be taken by yonder bloodthirsty demons," declared Lester, emphatically, and the determined looks of his companions showed that they shared his feelings.

Lightfoot smiled grimly. "Starvin' would be a pleasure compared ter what White Rattlesnake has in store for us," he exclaimed. "But probably we won't get fixed so tight as that. Let's hope so, at any rate."

The cheerful words and manner of the young ranger inspired them with renewed hopes, and they at once set to work in the moonlight to strengthen their position, Louise Lester being left by the fire.

The party labored with a will in the construction of a breastwork of rocks, but suddenly they were startled by a piercing scream.

It sounded from the direction of the fire, and was the voice of Louise Lester.

With an excited cry, Guy Garland dashed toward the spot where he had left the maiden, with Little Lightfoot scarcely behind him.

The moon was momentarily behind a cloud, rendering objects invisible; but at this moment it reappeared, and, as the mellow rays fell upon land and water, a startling sight was revealed.

The canoe in which they had crossed over to the island was rapidly moving down the stream, and within it, holding Louise Lester with one arm as he wielded the paddle with the other, was Black Raven, the renegade!

CHAPTER V.

BLACK RAVEN SCORES AN INNING.

BLACK RAVEN had played a shrewd game, and one that gave evidence of his marvelous cunning.

When the Wood Pilot paddled away from the shore that night, with the yells of the savages and the sound of hurtling arrows ringing in his ears, neither he nor his companions noticed a movement that took place just behind them.

Little did he imagine, as he urged the canoe out into the stream, that one of his worst enemies was within arm's-length of him.

Under the stern, secure from observation in the shadow cast by the craft, swam Black Raven, the renegade, his dark eyes glittering like a serpent's, and his face wreathed with exultation.

With wonderful dexterity, he had reached this position without discovery. Of course the renegade had an object in making this move; a cunning plan was being executed.

Black Raven had taken a fancy to Louise Lester, and determined to possess her; indeed, when he and his red colleague plotted the destruction of the train, it was agreed that he should have the girl, and White Rattlesnake the plunder.

He had calculated on having everything his own way, and when Lightfoot stepped in and blocked his game, the wrath of the villain was unbounded.

But now an opportunity to retrieve his bad luck presented itself, and the renegade was quick to embrace it.

He knew full well that danger attended his bold undertaking. Death awaited him, if discovered by the occupants of the boat, and he held himself in readiness to dive the instant his presence was made known.

But fortune favored the renegade. The Wood Pilot paddled serenely along, and presently the island loomed up ahead of them.

As the canoe neared the shore, Black Raven released his hold, and dropped beneath the surface.

Swimming under water, he came up under the bushes that fringed the bank, breathing more freely as he saw that his change of position had not been observed.

Hidden in the shadows, Black Raven watched and waited.

He saw the canoe drawn up on the shore, and a moment later beheld the settlers gathered in consultation around the newly-kindled fire.

Lightfoot stood there in plain view, his form presenting an excellent target, and the lurking renegade was strongly tempted to fire at his hated foe.

But this would be fatal to his scheme, so he curbed his passion with an effort.

The moments passed, and Black Raven had begun to grow impatient, when the consultation came to an end and the settlers all went to work on their fortification, leaving Louise Lester alone by the fire.

A gleam of exultation shot into the eyes of the renegade. This was the golden opportunity for which he had been longing.

Drawing himself out of the water, he dropped upon his hands and knees, and cautiously made his way toward the fire.

Noiseless as a serpent, he crept over the rough ground, reaching a point close to the maiden without being discovered.

With devilish exultance, Black Raven feasted his eyes upon the fair face of his intended prey, as she sat there, wholly unconscious of his presence.

Then he cast a hasty glance in the direction of the men; they were all busily at work.

The renegade gave a cat-like spring, and alighted by the side of the startled girl, clapping one brawny hand over her mouth to prevent an outcry.

Though taken wholly by surprise, the maiden struggled bravely, but, encircled by those muscular arms, her feeble efforts were of no avail.

With a triumphant chuckle, Black Raven started for the canoe, bearing his lovely burden.

The Evil One seemed to be aiding his own that night, for at this moment the moon, as if in collusion with the renegade, hid her face behind a cloud, and the island was wrapped in gloom.

Thanks to this, Black Raven gained the canoe with the captive without discovery; but while launching the craft, he removed his hand for an instant from the girl's mouth.

This moment of freedom, brief though it was, was improved by Louise, and from her lips issued a warning shriek that reached the ears of her friends.

Uttering a furious curse, Black Raven sprang into the craft with his prize, as the settlers came rushing down to the spot, and pushed off into the stream.

Just then the moon again shone forth with increased brilliancy, making the surroundings bright as day; the settlers stopped short in utter amazement at the sight they beheld, scarcely believing the evidence of their eyes, for it seemed impossible that the renegade could have executed such a daring movement.

Lightfoot was the only one who preserved his wonted coolness.

"Raising his rifle, he took careful aim at the receding form of the renegade and fired.

A sharp cry of pain answered the report of the piece, and Black Raven was seen to give a violent start; but the deceptive moonlight had rendered the boy's aim far from fatal.

With a disappointed cry, the young ranger raised his weapon for another shot, but ere he could pull trigger, the wily renegade dropped his paddle and interposed the form of his captive between himself and his foes.

No bullet could reach him without first piercing the maiden.

The Wood Pilot saw that he was outwitted, and he threw down his rifle in vexation.

"No use, friends!" he declared, sadly. "The villain hes got the bulge on us, an' no mistake. Thar's no way ter check him."

In impotent rage, the party stood on the shore and watched the little craft, as it drifted down

with the current and at length disappeared in the distance.

It seemed almost incredible that the girl had been stolen from their very midst, but such was indeed the case; Black Raven had triumphed.

The grief of Philip Lester at the loss of his daughter was sad to witness; throwing himself upon the earth, he sobbed like a child, while his whole frame shook with a sorrow that he could not contain.

His friends approached him with words of sympathy, but he gave them no heed; the thought of his loved child being borne off to a fate far worse than death nearly drove him frantic.

Lightfoot was visibly affected by the poor man's grief.

"Don't take on so, friend," he implored, as he knelt by Lester's side. "It won't do a 'tarnal bit o' good. Cheer up! Your daughter ain't lost yet, not by a long shot."

The cheerful tone of the young ranger had its effect on the settler.

With a mighty effort he managed in a measure to control himself, but there was a look of doubt on his face as he looked up into that of the young Wood Pilot.

"Alas!" he exclaimed, in a choked voice. "I fear that I shall never behold my daughter again."

"Nonsense, pard!" answered the boy, cheerily. "There's nothing impossible. There's still a chance for hope. I'll start this very night, an' do all in my power ter bring her back ter you. Black Raven shall be outwitted!"

The cheerful, confident speech of the young borderer inspired Lester with hope.

He seized the hand of the youth and shook it warmly.

"God bless you, my boy!" he exclaimed. "Yours is a noble spirit. Recover my daughter, and you win my everlasting gratitude."

"I'll do it, Cap, if it takes a leg," declared Lightfoot, decidedly. "I'll come back with her, or else not come at all. That's business!"

"And I'm with you if you will permit me to accompany you."

The speaker was Guy Garland, who stood beside the boy ranger, a determined look upon his manly countenance.

Lightfoot looked critically at the young man, and it was evident that his opinion of him was by no means unfavorable; he readily guessed why Garland was so ready to accompany him on his perilous mission.

"It ain't ev'ry one I'd take with me on sich a trip," he declared, "but I reckon I'll take you. You look the right sort."

"Thank you!" exclaimed Guy, his face lighting up with pleasure. "I'll do all I can to aid you, and I'm sure you'll never regret taking me."

The two young men shook hands.

Garland was impatient to be off to the rescue of the girl he loved, but the Wood Pilot explained that it would be better to wait a short time.

Undoubtedly there were red-skins on the watch, and, such being the case, it would be next to impossible to cross the stream in the moonlight without being discovered.

However, a mass of clouds was rapidly coming up, and would soon cover the face of the moon; then, in the darkness, the passage could be made in comparative safety.

So the two waited—Guy Garland in feverish impatience; the young ranger with the philosophical coolness that was one of his characteristics.

At length the orb of night was veiled in clouds, and darkness settled over the waters; the time for action was at hand.

Followed by the good-wishes of Philip Lester and his companions, they set out upon their hazardous undertaking.

Leaving their rifles behind them, as being too inconvenient for the occasion, the two young men plunged into the water, and were almost immediately lost to the gaze of the settlers.

Holding their pistols above the surface in one hand, that they might be dry and ready for use, Lightfoot and his companion swam silently across the stream.

Reaching the shore, their first act was to wring the water from their saturated clothing.

This done, Lightfoot proceeded to unfold his plans to Garland.

A portion of the Sioux, he believed, were still at the camp where he had seen them early in the evening, and so this would be the place where Black Raven would naturally take his captive. The red-skin camp up the river, then, was the objective point.

For it they started without loss of time. Lightfoot led the way with a readiness that marked his thorough knowledge of the surrounding forest, while Guy Garland followed with a speed and noiselessness that won a nod of approval from his more experienced companion.

They proceeded with due caution, not knowing how near they might be to the enemy, but not a sound was heard that would indicate the presence of a red-skin; the woods seemed to be wholly deserted.

Our two friends pushed on in silence for some time. The night was now spent, and the gray light of morning was creeping into the eastern skies.

Lightfoot, stopped suddenly with a warning "hust!"

"Easy!" he whispered. "I thought I heard a voice."

Both listened attentively, but no further sound was heard, and the ranger concluded that he was mistaken.

They started ahead cautiously, but ere a dozen steps had been taken, the sound of a human voice plainly reached their ears.

There was no mistake this time, and, curious to learn what was transpiring, our friends cautiously parted the foliage and peered ahead.

A startled exclamation burst from their lips, as they looked upon the scene before them.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ADVENTURES OF EBONY DICK.

LET us leave the two trailers for awhile, and follow the fortunes of another of our characters—Ebony Dick, the African.

He did not leave the wagon-train with the rest of his party; there were several articles in the wagons that he prized highly, and Dick was determined not to leave the camp without first securing them.

So he was left behind by the settlers, who, in their haste and excitement, did not discover his absence until they had reached the island.

Ebony Dick had not heeded their movements, so engrossed was he in his own work, and when, at last, he was ready to leave, he looked about him with a cry of amazement, as he found himself to be the only occupant of the camp.

"Golly!" exclaimed the darky. "Dey's gon' an' lef' dis chile in de lurch, for suah. An' what's mo', dis darky don't know de way dey tuk, either. Oh! good Lor', what'll a po' nigger do?"

With an expression of most ludicrous bewilderment on his sable face, Dick glared helplessly around him.

As he stood there, the picture of despair, the sound of swiftly-moving feet, coming in that direction, reached his ears.

The ominous sound roused the negro into action. He guessed that it was the party of Sioux, and having a mortal dread of red-skins, Ebony Dick sought a hiding-place with alacrity.

Hardly had he concealed himself in a dense clump of bushes, when the savages, led on by Black Raven and a stalwart chief, dashed into the camp.

The ferocious yells they emitted upon finding that their prey had escaped them, almost froze the blood in the veins of the terrified darky.

Ebony Dick was ordinarily no coward, but this was his first experience with the noble red-man, and the appearance of the yelling, painted pack gave his nerves a shock.

A portion of the savages darted on in pursuit of the whites, while the remainder proceeded to plunder the wagons.

In an agony of suspense, the hidden African watched them as they whooped and quarreled over the plunder, darting here and there, and seeming like veritable demons in the red glare of the camp-fire.

Several times they passed near the darky's place of concealment, much to his fear and anxiety; and suddenly his heart gave a leap, as he beheld a burly savage coming straight toward him, his snaky eyes fixed upon the foliage that concealed him.

With an inward exclamation of dismay, Ebony Dick shrunk back, expecting every moment to feel the knife of the warrior on his scalp.

But his fears were groundless, for the Indian passed on without discovering his presence.

However, the African did not venture to peep out again, relying on his ears for information concerning the movements of his foes.

Thus the time passed; presently the party who had gone in pursuit of the settlers, returned unsuccessful, and joined their companions.

At last, after everything belonging to the

train that was worth taking had been appropriated by the red-skins, they started for camp with their plunder, first setting fire to the wagons, which were of no use to them.

Ebony Dick breathed more freely when the last Sioux had rid the vicinity of his presence, but he did not venture from his hiding-place for some time after.

It was after midnight when the African ventured forth. Standing by the burning wagons, he meditated upon his situation.

Of course it was extremely dangerous to be alone in the forest, surrounded by bloodthirsty savages; it was expedient to rejoin the settlers at once.

But such a plan was more easily thought of than executed, for Dick was totally ignorant of his friends' whereabouts.

The negro was something of a scout; during the journey across the plains, Sam Cole had taught him several points in prairie lore, and, now that the dreaded Sioux were out of sight, he went to work more coolly.

Dropping upon his knees, Dick made a careful search for the trail of his friends, aided by the light of the burning vehicles.

The ground was rough and unyielding, and this, coupled with the fact that the Indians had just tramped all over the spot, made his task a difficult one; but at last his skill and industry were rewarded.

The African cracked his heels together exultantly.

"Ki-yi!" he exclaimed. "Dis chile no fool. I's gwine ter be with Mars' Lester afore mawn-in', er bu'st a-tryin', suah."

He started at once, but at this moment a faint whinny reached his ears.

It came from the horses, which had in some unaccountable manner escaped the eyes of the red-skins, and a happy thought seized upon the darky.

"Bressed if dis coon am gwine ter walk, when he kin jes' as well ride," he declared, as he retraced his steps to where the horses were tethered.

Selecting the best animal, Ebony Dick mounted, and set out upon his journey.

He started in the right direction, but once out of the light of the fire, he had but his own judgment to guide him, for the darkness of Stygia enwrapped the forest, rendering the trail invisible.

For a time all went well, as he moved slowly but steadily through the gloomy woods; but Dick's ride was destined to come to a disastrous termination.

Suddenly a huge owl flew past, flapping its wings and uttering a mournful hoot.

The sound startled the horse, and the next moment the animal gave a sudden plunge forward, nearly unseating his rider, and tore off through the woods at a gallop.

"Whoa, dar!" cried the astonished darky, as with difficulty he maintained his seat. "What der deuce ails yer? Whoa, I tell yer!"

But this was what the horse was disinclined to do; thoroughly frightened, he dashed through the forest at full speed.

Clinging to his back like a monkey, Ebony Dick sought to check the flying brute; in his excitement, his fear of the Indians had vanished as if by magic, and he yelled "whoa!" as freely as if there was not a savage within a thousand miles of him.

But his shouts only served to increase the fright of the animal, which tore along like a thunderbolt; darting between trees, bounding over logs and boulders, crashing through thickets, of tangled briers and bushes, which threatened to tear the rider from his perch, the steed kept on his mad career.

Stretched on the animal's back, his long arms wrapped about his neck, his eyes bulging from their sockets and his woolly hair fairly standing on end in his terror, Ebony Dick clung like a leech, yelling at the top of his lungs.

It was an exciting yet laughable scene.

It is difficult to say how long and far the African would have been borne at this break-neck pace, had not other agencies interposed.

As they passed through a thicket of unusual density, an overhanging bough caught Dick and swept him from the animal's back.

Fortunately, the darky struck on his head, and the hardness of that member saved him from serious injury.

Rising from the ground, Ebony Dick stared bewilderedly after the horse, whose hoof-beats were now almost inaudible in the distance.

"Golly!" he muttered, as he wiped the blood from his face, where it had come in contact with briers during his wild ride. "Wonder if dis chile am all heah! Dat'ar war rough while

it lasted. Golly! Didn't know dar war so much fun in dem ol' nags afore. S'pects dis chicken 'll take Shank's mar' next time he's gwine to ride in de woods for pleasure."

After cautiously feeling of himself to see that nothing was missing, the negro again started, feeling somewhat stiff and sore from his recent experience.

Ebony Dick pushed resolutely on, until at last the shadows began to dissipate, and the cold, gray tint of early morning appeared in the sky.

Then it was that he made a startling discovery. The trail of the settlers was nowhere to be seen, and instantly the truth flashed through the African's mind.

He had started out all right, but had soon left the trail, and, having no guide in the darkness, he had spent the night in wandering through the forest in a circle.

His present situation was worse than before he left the deserted camp; he was hopelessly lost in the vast wilderness, surrounded on every hand by savage foes, and with only a knife and pistol with which to defend himself.

As the hopelessness of his situation burst upon him, Ebony Dick threw himself down upon a log in despair.

He had but little hope of ever reaching his friends; burying his face in his hands, he gave himself up to gloomy meditation.

Suddenly his reverie was interrupted by a rustling in the shrubbery. Some one was approaching the spot. Instantly Dick was on his feet.

Looking about him for some place of concealment, his eyes fell upon the log; it was hollow.

Without hesitation the black crawled into one end of the log, just as the bushes near the other end parted, and a Sioux warrior, in paint and feathers, appeared upon the scene, unconscious of what the log contained.

But as Ebony Dick entered the log, he made the unpleasant discovery that he was not its only occupant.

His hand touched something soft, while at the same moment a low, angry growl fell upon his ears.

Instantly the startled Ethiopian divined the truth. A grizzly bear had taken possession of the log, and was calmly sleeping there when disturbed by his sudden entrance.

Dick was both surprised and alarmed at the novel situation, but his plan of action was quickly formed.

Swiftly drawing his knife, he aimed a powerful blow at the broad haunches of the grizzly.

The effect was electrical.

Stung by the blade, the bear gave a plunge forward, with a roar of pain, and shot out of the log like a stone from a catapult.

And at this moment the Sioux warrior was standing not a dozen feet from the end of the log; the grizzly rushed out directly upon him, and a collision resulted.

It would be hard to tell which was the more surprised, the savage or the bear; but the grizzly was the quicker, and that Sioux warrior was torn into shoe-strings, figuratively speaking, before he could draw a weapon in his defense.

Meanwhile, Ebony Dick, believing that the vicinity was too warm for him, had backed out of the log, and while the grizzly was engaged with the red-skin, he hastened away from the spot at full speed.

However, before he had gone a dozen yards, there was a loud crashing behind him, and turning, Dick was horrified to see Bruin in pursuit.

With a cry of disgust, the African fled through the forest; fear lent wings to his flight, and he fairly flew over the ground.

But the grizzly stuck to his trail, his little red eyes glowing with mischief, and Ebony Dick saw with dismay that the brute was rapidly overhauling him.

The negro looked anxiously about him for some means of escape.

Suddenly he recalled to mind the fact that some one had once told him that bears could not climb.

Happy thought! A way of deliverance was open, and Dick looked for a suitable tree in which to take refuge.

There was a tall beech just ahead, and he made for it with alacrity.

Puffing and blowing from his exertions, the darky reached the tree, and scrambled up like a cat, just in time to escape the teeth of the infuriated grizzly.

Ebony Dick did not stop until he reached one of the topmost branches, and then, from his

lofty perch, he looked down in triumph upon his pursuer.

It was a triumph that was short-lived, however. Judge of his astonishment and dismay upon beholding Bruin already part way up the tree.

Ebony Dick looked down upon the ascending beast in bewilderment.

"Golly! I s'pects dar's a mistake somewhars," he muttered. "De pusson who tole dis chile dat bears can't climb, don't know so much about b'ars as a Car'lina 'coon. Dat b'ar's a-comin' up like greased lightnin'. Oh Lord! what's a po' darky gwine ter do?"

In helpless bewilderment, the treed darky watched the progress of his ursine foe.

Bruin came steadily up the tree, his small, wickedly gleaming eyes fixed upon his trembling victim.

Seated upon the highest limb that was safe—one that extended at right angles with the trunk of the tree, Ebony Dick waited in breathless anxiety, hoping that Bruin would sicken of his bargain and descend.

No; the grizzly came up, slowly but surely, each instant drawing nearer to the African's perch.

A desperate gleam shot into the eyes of the negro, and he clutched his knife nervously. As the beast reached a point on a level with his perch, he poised himself and made a ferocious lunge.

A deep growl came from the grizzly, as, with a single sweep of his hairy paw, he sent the weapon flying through the air.

With a cry of dismay, Ebony Dick retreated out upon the limb.

Bruin followed deliberately.

The African crept out as far as he dared, while the grizzly, bent on mischief, continued to advance.

The bough bent and cracked, threatening to break under their united weight.

Dick realized that the bough would yield if the bear advanced further; an ugly fall was inevitable, and he determined to take time by the forelock, and make a voluntary leap.

Drawing a long breath and shutting his eyes, the negro let go his hold; but he did not drop, and a cry of horror burst from his lips as he comprehended the truth.

His belt behind had caught in some manner upon the limb, and the unlucky African hung suspended between heaven and earth, like a fish at the end of an angler's line.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RANGER'S STRATAGEM.

SUCH was the peculiar scene that greeted the eyes of Little Lightfoot and Guy Garland, as they arrived at the spot.

A loud laugh pealed from the lips of the former, as he first caught sight of the negro dangling in the air like a huge lobster; but the next instant his face took on a more serious expression, for he saw that the darky's predicament was not so laughable after all.

The young ranger acted without delay.

He disliked to use his pistol, for the report might reach the ears of some prowling savage, and thus be detrimental to their plans; but he decided to run the risk in behalf of a fellow-being.

Quick as a flash, he drew a bead on the grizzly.

"Be ready to shoot, if my bullet don't do it," he directed, and the next moment the sharp crack of the weapon rung out upon the morning air.

The beast gave a snarl of rage, and toppled from the tree, wildly clawing the air as he fell; the shot was not instantly fatal, but what life was left in the grizzly was knocked completely out of him by the fall, and he lay a quivering mass at the feet of his slayer.

"That was easy done," remarked Lightfoot, grimly. "Now to git our sable friend off of his hook."

Ascending the tree, the youth crept out on the branch with the agility of a cat, his light weight permitting him to do so without danger.

Reaching the African, he lifted him by the collar so that he could grasp the bough; then he released the belt, and assisted him to a safer position.

Ebony Dick gave vent to a tremendous sigh of relief.

"Thank de Lor' you cum along! Dis hangin' like a shirt on a close-line am wuss dan de b'ar," he exclaimed, as he followed his rescuer to *terra firma*.

But Dick was not yet "out of the woods," in more senses than one. Fresh danger threatened him and his companions. The hand of Fate seemed turned against them.

Scarcely had Little Lightfoot and the negro rejoined Garland, when they were startled by a chorus of shrill yells close at hand.

At the same moment, a party of Sioux warriors, numbering over a dozen, sprung from the bushes and surrounded our three friends.

It was a complete surprise, but the Wood Pilot did not lose his customary coolness.

"Break through, an' run for your lives," he yelled, setting the example himself by rushing among the savages.

There was no time for firing, but his hunting-knife flashed brightly through the air, as he dashed forward with an impetuosity that cleared him of the red cordon.

His companions started to follow, but they were not as fortunate.

Guy Garland got in a shot from his pistol, and a painted wretch went down, sounding his death-yell; but before he could fire again, he was completely hemmed in.

Using his pistol as a club, the young man fought the savages, hand to hand, but his herculean efforts proved unavailing, and he was soon overpowered.

Nor did Ebony Dick fare any better.

The African had lost his knife and pistol, but this did not dishearten him; he still had Nature's weapons left, and right well he knew how to use them.

Uttering a yell that rivaled those of the Indians in fierceness, he sprung forward with clinched fists and lowered head, his arms flying like windmills.

The first savage so unfortunate as to be in the way, received the woolly head of the African in his stomach, and was doubled up like a jackknife.

The second saw stars from a violent collision with the huge fist of the excited black, while three more went down in succession like so many ninepins.

So novel and unexpected was his attack, that Ebony Dick actually cleared himself from the ring of whooping red-skins; but then he caught his foot against a rock, and fell heavily.

Ere he could rise, he was pounced upon, and, spite of his desperate struggles, securely bound. Both he and Guy were helpless captives.

Meanwhile Little Lightfoot, having successfully forced his way out of the Sioux traps, was racing through the forest with the fleetness that had won him his name.

One hasty glance behind had convinced him that his two companions were as good as prisoners. He could do nothing in their behalf at present, for three burly warriors were at his heels, bent on his capture, and it would require all his ability to elude them.

A brief spurt carried the youth some distance ahead of his pursuers; but the trio were tall, athletic fellows, remarkably fleet of foot, and the boy saw that, wonderful runner though he was, it would be no easy task to throw them off the track.

As the chase continued, Lightfoot determined to make an effort to lessen the number of his pursuers.

With this intention he stopped suddenly, and drew a bead on the nearest savage.

The pursuers were not anticipating such a movement, and, simultaneously with the report of the pistol, came the death-yell of the stricken Sioux, as he threw up his arms and fell headlong upon the earth.

With a triumphant shout, the Wood Pilot dashed on; he was answered by the two remaining pursuers, who, undaunted by the fate of their brother warrior, clung to his trail with the persistency of bull-dogs.

Again the young ranger wheeled and fired, but this time the red-skins were on the alert.

They bounded swiftly from side to side, so as to disconcert his aim, and the shot flew wild.

But one barrel of the boy's pistols now remained loaded, and he did not fire again, wisely reserving it for a more critical moment.

On, through the forest, the chase continued.

The Sioux made no attempt to use their weapons, being evidently determined to take the young scout prisoner.

But Little Lightfoot was confident that he could outrun his pursuers; this, however, would take time, and the youth was anxious to dispose of them as soon as possible, that he might hasten to the rescue of Louise Lester and his two late companions.

He determined to resort to strategy, and a plan was quickly formed by his fertile brain.

Suddenly he stumbled and fell to the ground,

and as he rose to his feet and ran on again, there was a visible limp to his gait, as if he had injured his foot.

This was performed so naturally that the red-skins were wholly deceived.

They yelled exultantly, little imagining that the apparent mishap was but a clever trick on the part of the cunning ranger.

Lightfoot ran on at a greatly reduced rate of speed, his object being to draw his foes within reach.

On came the two warriors, gaining at every stride, their snaky eyes gleaming triumphantly, as they thought of the glory that would follow the capture of their famous young enemy.

Soon but a dozen yards separated pursuers and pursued.

Suddenly Lightfoot wheeled with upraised arm, and the next instant his weapon spoke, sharp and spiteful.

It was his last shot, and it was not wasted.

Before he could dodge, the nearest Sioux received the leaden missile in his painted breast, and fell without a cry.

Uttering a reckless yell, the ranger whipped out his knife, and rushed upon the surviving warrior with the fury of a demon.

But the savage was on the alert, and by leaping nimbly to one side, he avoided the sudden onslaught.

The next instant his tomahawk was poised, preparatory to being hurled at the young ranger's head.

Lightfoot saw his danger, and with a lightning-like movement, he jumped behind a tree.

The savage imitated his example, seeking the shelter of another tree a dozen yards away, with an alacrity that was truly laughable.

Behind their respective shelters crouched the two foes.

Lightfoot, cool as ever, hastened to reload his pistols. This gave him an advantage in the novel duel, for the savage possessed no weapon but knife and hatchet.

However, a tomahawk in the hands of an experienced thrower is no despicable weapon, and the Pilot of the Wood took care not to expose himself.

Behind the trees the two foes crouched and waited, neither venturing to show himself for fear of becoming the target of the other.

Five minutes passed in silence, and the ranger began to get impatient. He resolved to make a move.

As he looked about him, a sudden thought flashed through his mind.

"Jest ther thing!" he muttered. "Wait a minit, an' I'll give ye a point in skulkin', ye copper-skinned pirate!"

The scene of these events was a comparatively open spot, and around the tree that sheltered the scout the tall grass sprung up to a height of two feet or more; a few yards away was a clump of bushes.

His movements hidden by the trunk of the tree, Lightfoot sunk flat upon his stomach, and commenced worming himself through the tall grass.

With the cunning of a panther he worked his way along, the grass being scarcely disturbed by his passage.

Reaching the clump of bushes, the youth peered cautiously at the tree that concealed the red-man; the latter was evidently in blissful ignorance of his change of position, and the ranger gave an exultant chuckle.

Pistol in hand, he continued to watch for his foe. Presently the painted face of the red-skin appeared from behind the tree; after giving one glance to see that the coast was clear, he made a sudden leap, landing in the grass in front of his hiding-place.

"Hello! The pesky varmint is up ter some trick," muttered Lightfoot, as he attentively watched the movements of his red enemy.

A slight waving of the grass betrayed the fact that the warrior was stealthily advancing, and the ranger chuckled inwardly.

"Ther red-skin's a-goin' ter makeme a friendly call, but I reckon he won't find ther folks ter home," he muttered, grimly.

It was rather a joke on the Sioux, and the dare-devil youth enjoyed the situation immensely.

The warrior crept forward like a serpent, now and then lifting his tufted head and peering exultantly toward the spot where, as he supposed, his enemy was concealed.

Soon he was close to the tree.

With a triumphant whoop, the Sioux leaped from the grass, and darted forward with uplifted tomahawk.

His astonishment was unbounded as he saw that the ranger was nowhere to be seen; a ring-

ing laugh reached his ears, as the Wood Pilot confronted him with leveled weapon.

The next moment the luckless Sioux warrior lay stretched upon the sward, with a bullet imbedded in his brain.

"I reckon you ain't so durned smart as you tuck yerself ter be, ole copper-skin," chuckled the boy ranger, as he stood over his fallen foe in triumph.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CAVERN IN THE CLIFF.

LEAVING the dead Indians where they had fallen, Little Lightfoot hastened away from the place, bent on the rescue of his friends.

Feeling sure that the captives would be taken to the camp by the river, it was toward that spot he directed his steps without hesitation.

It was nearly noon when he reached the bluff by the river—the scene of his exciting combat with the Indian.

Approaching the brink on his hands and knees, the Wood Pilot peered eagerly over the river.

As he had anticipated, the Sioux encampment was still there, though but a small portion of the savages were present.

Most of them were, without doubt, down the stream, planning an attack upon the party of settlers on the island.

The three captives were there, secured with their backs to trees, and surrounded by their fiendish captors.

Lightfoot, from his lofty position, looked thoughtfully down upon the camp. He was meditating a plan of action.

The approach to the camp was open on all sides; it would be next to impossible to creep up, unobserved, in broad daylight; much more so to release even one of the prisoners, under the very eyes of the savages. It would be foolhardiness to attempt it.

There was no alternative but to wait until darkness set in; even then, the task would be attended by deadly danger, and success was uncertain.

Safely hidden among the bushes near the edge of the bluff, Little Lightfoot watched and waited in growing impatience.

He was anxious to accomplish his undertaking, and get back to the island, as soon as possible.

At length night came; and as soon as it was dark enough, the youth set out upon his mission.

Descending the face of the bluff by means of the stout vines, he dropped into the water, and swam silently across.

Reaching the opposite shore, he wrung the water from his garments, examined his weapons, then crept stealthily toward the Sioux encampment.

Thanks to the darkness of the night, he was enabled to do this without fear of discovery.

All went well until he reached the outside of the radius of light thrown by the fire; then the youth's advance was checked.

The Indians, who were all wide-awake, talking and smoking, were directly between him and the prisoners, and it was an utter impossibility to cross the lighted space without discovery.

Crouching beside a hollow log, Little Lightfoot pondered over the difficulty.

The intervening space must be crossed, if he would rescue his friends; but how?

As the young ranger was cudgeling his brain for an idea, two of the Sioux warriors suddenly rose to their feet, and walked deliberately toward him.

Lightfoot gave an inward exclamation of dismay.

If he staid where he was, discovery was inevitable.

It was too late to retreat, and the youth, adopting the only expedient left to him, promptly crept into the hollow log.

He found no grizzly within, as Ebony Dick had done, but something equally as startling occurred.

The two savages lifted the log, grunting in surprise at its unexpected weight, and carried it, with its human contents, to the camp-fire.

The Wood Pilot was in an agony of apprehension, lest the Indians intended using the log to replenish their fire.

In that case, he was in for a roasting; but his fears proved groundless.

The red-skins meant to utilize the timber for a seat, and as the young ranger heard them squat down upon it, and comprehended the truth, he felt that it was the most fortunate event that could have happened.

In this curious manner, he had reached the

coveted point, and by the unconscious aid of the red-skins themselves.

The scout's plan, now, was to wait until the warriors slept, and then creep out and liberate his friends.

Impatiently he waited.

All unconscious of what their seat contained, the savages smoked contentedly.

At last, one by one, they threw aside their pipes and stretched themselves upon the grass, until all had succumbed to the drowsy god.

They did not deem it necessary to keep a watch over their captives.

The latter were so securely bound that it was impossible for them to escape without aid, and who would venture into the camp to their rescue?

As the sonorous breathing of the red-skins reached the watchful ears of the ranger, he realized that the time for action had arrived.

Cautiously he backed out of the log.

Both Guy Garland and the negro were awake, and they were petrified with amazement, as they beheld Little Lightfoot noiselessly issue from the log and stand before them.

With his finger upon his lips as a caution for silence, the youth glided to their sides.

"Hist! Don't move!" he warned, in a low whisper. "Not a sound, if you want ter git out o' this 'tarnal place."

The prisoners obeyed, and a few rapid cuts from the ranger's knife relieved them of their bonds.

Thus far everything had run smoothly but the hardest part of the undertaking yet remained to be done.

Louise Lester was sleeping peacefully, her back against a tree, and the youth knew that it would be no easy matter to awaken her in silence.

However, it must be accomplished some way.

Gliding noiselessly to the girl's side, he severed the thongs without disturbing her; and now came the critical moment.

Leaning over the slumbering maiden, Lightfoot touched her gently, at the same time whispering softly in her ear.

The result was disastrous, for, at the touch of the scout's hand, Louise suddenly opened her eyes with a nervous scream.

That scream did the mischief; in a moment every red-skin was on his feet.

Gritting his teeth determinedly, the young ranger snatched up the light form of the bewildered girl, and darted away in the darkness, almost before the savages could comprehend what was transpiring in their midst.

Guy Garland started to follow, but the young man's evil star was in the ascendant that eventful night.

He fell over the log that had been so serviceable to the Wood Pilot, and, ere he could rise, was pounced upon and again made prisoner.

Ebony Dick, more fortunate, fought his way through, and disappeared in an opposite direction, hotly pursued by two of the savages.

The main body of the Indians, however, paid no regard to the flying African; the other fugitives required their undivided attention.

Black Raven had left the white maiden in their charge, and they dreaded his wrath if she should escape; this, added to a desire to capture their hated young foe, the ranger, caused them to dart away in pursuit like a pack of hounds.

Little Lightfoot, meantime, had obtained a slight start, and was speeding in the direction of the river, bearing his lovely burden with as much ease as though she were but an infant, though she was fully his equal in point of size and weight.

Louise had recognized her rescuer, and she lay passively in his arms, too frightened to speak or move.

The young ranger could hear his foes, as they came bounding in pursuit, but the darkness was so intense that the parties were totally invisible to each other.

The youth, running like a deer, soon reached the river. Bounding down the bank, he plunged in without hesitation, supporting the maiden with one powerful arm.

With long, sweeping strokes, Lightfoot swam straight across, until the precipitous side of the bluff, rearing out of the water, checked further progress.

Without an instant's hesitation, the youth parted the mass of vines that wrapped the face of the cliff as with a veil.

This covering of nature was much thicker than one would suppose from casual observation.

Next to the wall the vines were formed into a rude but strong ladder, and up this Little Light-

foot clambered with the assured air of one who knew just where he was going.

Half-way up the face of the bluff, a small, rudely-formed opening in the solid rock appeared; the vine-ladder ended here, but another began just above the opening, continuing to the top of the wall.

Lightfoot assisted Louise into the aperture, which was barely wide enough for both to squeeze in abreast; then bidding her, in a whisper, to follow him closely, he led the way through the passage on his hands and knees, for the height of the walls would not admit of a different attitude.

"This ain't much of a place fur a lady, I'll allow," remarked the youth, apologetically. "However, that's a better place right ahead."

Louise Lester was of the opinion that any situation was preferable to the one from which she had just been released, and she said as much, as she pluckily followed her rescuer through the tunnel in the rock.

After advancing a short distance, they came to a halt.

"Remain where you are, a minit," said he, "an' I'll throw a leetle light on ther subject."

Searching for a moment, he procured a torch, and as it flamed up brightly, Louise obtained a good view of the strange place into which she had been conducted.

It was an underground cavern or chamber, with roughly-hewn floor and walls, and about twenty feet square; from one end ran the passage, by means of which they had entered the cave from the outside.

It was a curious place, possibly the work of Nature, but more likely the handicraft of some extinct race.

The Wood Pilot had discovered it by merest accident, two years before, and had conceived the idea of turning it into a retreat for his individual use. He had constructed the ladders, by which to reach the cave both from above and below, and took care that the entrance was carefully concealed from the gaze of any person on the river.

Here was where he spent his time, safe from man and beast, when not at the settlement or rambling through the forest; he made it his head-quarters when trapping for beaver in the neighboring stream, and more than once had it been his salvation when pursued by his foes, for not a red-skin in the vicinity was aware of its existence.

A couch, rudely formed of bear and panther skins, lay in one corner; in another were a number of steel traps, an old but serviceable rifle, a brace of pistols, and a miscellaneous collection of knives, hatchets, bows and arrows—enough to stock a small-sized arsenal.

Lightfoot held the torch above his head, as he glanced around the chamber with a look of pride.

"This is my den, miss," he said, "an' hyar you'll be safe enuff, I reckon, fur none o' ther red-skins know 'bout this place. So make yourself ter home; that's a couch, sich as it is, an' I advise you to lay down an' get some rest."

The cheerful tones of the boy served to inspire Louise with fresh hope and courage, and, following his advice, she reclined upon the skins, though not to sleep; she was still too excited for that.

Placing the torch in a niche in the wall, in a corner where the light would not penetrate into the tunnel, he left the maiden, and stole back to the mouth of the passage.

Being anxious to learn what his late pursuers were doing, he parted the leafy screen, and looked cautiously out upon the river.

A portion of his enemies were still there, searching diligently along the opposite bank. It was the savages' belief that the fugitives had gone down the stream with the current, and they directed their course accordingly.

The ranger was confident that the Sioux were totally ignorant of the truth, and that he and the maiden were in comparative safety.

Still he was not satisfied, Guy Garland was yet a captive in the hands of the red-skins, and, while he remained there, Lightfoot considered his work but half completed.

With rapidly-working brain, the ranger looked longingly in the direction of the Indian camp; after pondering several minutes, his countenance suddenly lighted.

"Jes' ther thing!" he muttered. "It's mighty risky, I'll allow; but I'm bettin' I'll carry ther thing through. Any way, I'll try it, fur I can't do more than fail."

With this determination, the young ranger retraced his steps to the cavern.

Procuring a number of articles from a cor-

ner, he lighted another torch, and left the presence of the maiden.

Five minutes passed, and the torch, fast burning out, caused weird shadows to dance about the chamber; ten minutes elapsed in death-like silence, and Louise began to grow nervous.

Suddenly she uttered a scream of terror.

Standing before her was an Indian warrior, in war-paint and feathers.

CHAPTER IX. TO THE RESCUE.

HORROR-STRICKEN, Louis Lester stared at the ferocious looking savage who confronted her; but before she had time to utter a second cry, the apparent Indian raised his hand in warning.

"Hush!" he exclaimed, in the familiar accents of Little Lightfoot. "Don't be alarmed, miss; it's only me. I didn't allow I'd skeer you so."

Louise eyed the speaker in amazement. It was, indeed, the young ranger, though no one would recognize him by his appearance.

From a number of Indian garments in his possession, he had made up a costume, and, with the aid of plenty of paint and a few eagle feathers, had transformed himself into a passable red-skin.

His long, dark hair and piercing eyes aided in the deception, and as he stood there in the light of the flickering torch, wrapped in a tattered blanket, he looked the very image of a Sioux warrior.

The Wood Pilot at once proceeded to explain to his companion the cause for his masquerade. He was about to start to the rescue of Garland, he said, and would probably return within a few hours. Meantime, she was to remain there in the underground chamber.

Louise by no means relished the prospect of remaining alone in that gloomy place, but as the youth assured her that she was perfectly safe, and that he would soon return with Guy, she sensibly submitted to the arrangement without a murmur.

Arming himself as befitted the character he was about to impersonate, the youth, after taking leave of Louise, approached a corner of the cavern, directly opposite the tunnel; the wall was to all appearances solid, but as Little Lightfoot removed a large, square stone from its place, a dark aperture was revealed.

Replacing the stone behind him, the youth advanced on hands and knees; he was in another narrow passage similar to the first.

The youth proceeded without hesitation, until at length a faint ray of light was visible, coming from above.

The tunnel terminated in a narrow shaft, leading directly upward, upon the side of which a rudely-contrived ladder was suspended.

This was more of the handiwork of the ranger, for he knew the convenience of having more than one way of egress from his retreat.

Ascending the ladder, Little Lightfoot found himself in a dense clump of bushes, which grew all about the pit, concealing it from the view of any passer-by.

Lest some one should enter the thicket by mere chance, and discover the entrance, the youth had made it doubly safe by piling a quantity of brush-wood over the mouth of the shaft, leaving only a small hole in one corner, just over the ladder, through which to effect his ingress and egress.

The Wood Pilot made his way out of the thicket, carefully concealing his tracks behind him, and struck boldly out in the direction of the river.

He meant to enter the camp of the Sioux without loss of time.

The scheme was a daring one, but the bold and fearless youth was just the person to put it into execution.

Reaching the stream, the disguised Pilot of the Wood swam across, and then noiselessly approached the Indian encampment.

The savages were moving excitedly to and fro, and Lightfoot quietly mingled with the party without exciting attention.

It took him but a moment to comprehend how matters stood; Guy Garland was seated upon the ground, with his back to a tree, bound and helpless, but Ebony Dick was nowhere to be seen; doubtless, he had succeeded in making his escape.

The savages had abandoned the search for the other fugitives, and were congregated about the fire, excitedly discussing the situation.

Mingling with the savages, Little Lightfoot listened to their excited remarks; he understood the Sioux tongue almost as well as did the red-skins, themselves, and every word uttered was duly taken in by the young scout.

As he listened to the various opinions, vouchsafed concerning his disappearance, the youth could with difficulty repress the amused laugh that rose to his lips.

The fact that he, the subject of their animated conversation, was at that moment in their very midst, was exceedingly amusing, and the daring boy rather enjoyed the situation.

As for the savages, not one of them had the slightest suspicion of the truth.

Little Lightfoot sauntered coolly about the encampment; though to outward appearances calm and indifferent, yet he was impatient to get to work.

What he intended to do must be accomplished while the darkness favored his plans; and already the night was far spent.

The youth directed his steps in the direction of Guy Garland's position.

Sauntering coolly along, he passed close to the prisoner, and, casting a swift glance around, to make sure that none of the Indians were observing his movements, he whispered softly in the young man's ear:

"Hist! Don't start! I'm Lightfoot, and I've come to save you," he said. "Be ready to act when the time comes. I'll be on hand."

The expression of bewilderment on Guy's face betokened his surprise, but he gave a slight nod, signifying that he comprehended.

The young ranger strolled on, well-satisfied at his success thus far.

Garland was aware of his presence; now, then, for the next move on the programme.

The Wood Pilot went to work without delay. Part of the savages were still walking about; the remainder had seated themselves upon the log, close beside the fire.

The boy ranger sauntered up, and threw himself carelessly upon the ground at one end of the log.

He was still and listless to all outward appearances, but under the folds of his tattered blanket, his fingers were nimbly at work.

Before leaving the cavern in the cliff, he had concealed about his person a large powder-horn; now he proceeded to empty the entire contents of this upon the inside surface of the hollow log, at arm's length from the end.

This done, he laid a tiny train to the outside of the log. His movements were executed with the utmost caution, and he was pleased to know that they were unobserved.

Everything was now in readiness for the final stroke. The critical moment was at hand, and the youth drew a long breath.

Producing a match, he lighted it, shielding the blaze beneath the blanket, and then applied it to the leaves around the train of powder.

At the same time he rose to his feet, yawned and stretched his limbs in the most natural manner imaginable, and walked away from the dangerous spot.

The coolness and nerve of the young ranger at this critical moment were truly wonderful.

Scarcely had he taken a half-dozen paces, when the hiss of powder came and then a terrific explosion!

The log was shattered into a thousand pieces, and the fragments flew in every direction, while the savages who were so unfortunate as to be seated thereon were hurled violently into the air.

Two of them were killed outright, and all were badly shaken up and more or less injured.

Most of the red-skins landed in the blazing fire, from which they struggled frantically to escape, howling with pain and rage.

The other warriors hastened to their assistance.

Meanwhile, Lightfoot was not idle.

When the explosion took place, he threw himself flat upon the ground, thus escaping the flying fragments that filled the air.

Then, leaping to his feet, he bounded to the side of Guy Garland.

The latter, being fully a dozen yards from the log, had escaped the explosion unharmed, and, while the Sioux were extricating their luckless brethren from their warm position, he was speedily set at liberty.

"Come!" exclaimed Little Lightfoot, hurriedly. "There's no time to lose. We must git out o' this hornet's nest. Follow me!"

Even as he spoke, two burly warriors espied them, and suspecting the truth, they flung themselves in the path of the fugitives.

There was no hesitation on the part of the latter. Flinging aside the blanket, the disguised ranger bounded forward, flourishing his hatchet.

One of the warriors went down in a heap, his head split open from crown to chin.

His companion went to grass before a vigorous blow from the ready fist of Guy Garland.

The way was now clear, and the two young men darted away from the camp as fast as their legs could carry them.

Little Lightfoot led the way, with Guy close at his heels.

The red-skins now began to comprehend the trick that had been played upon them, and they came whooping in pursuit.

The fugitives had a good start, however, and they reached the creek in safety.

"Foller me, an' don't make a sound," directed the boy ranger, as he dropped into the stream.

Guy obeyed, and the two swam noiselessly across, reaching the bluff just as the foremost of their pursuers arrived on the bank they had a moment before quitted.

Thanks to the intensity of the gloom, they were not observed, and the next moment they were safe behind the screen of vines.

Thankful for his escape, and wondering at the strangeness of the place into which he was being conducted, Guy Garland followed his friend up the ladder and into the narrow passage.

Soon after they stood within the underground chamber.

The torch which the youth left burning had been consumed, and the place was now wrapped in darkness.

However, the young ranger quickly produced another and proceeded to light it.

As the torch blazed up, and objects in the cavern became visible, Little Lightfoot started back, a cry of amazement pealing from his lips.

Louise Lester was gone!

CHAPTER X.

HOLDING THE FORT.

THE ranger turned to his companion in bewilderment.

"This beats all," he exclaimed. The gal is gone, sure as shootin'."

As the scout spoke, the skins in the corner were thrown aside, and the missing maiden stood revealed.

The next moment she was clasped in the strong arms of her lover.

Louise explained that she had heard their approaching footsteps, and not knowing whether they belonged to friend or foe, she had hurriedly concealed herself in the first suitable place she could find; when she heard the familiar voice of Little Lightfoot, however, her fears were dispelled.

The first act of the young ranger was to wash the war-paint from his face; then he doffed the rig that had done him such good service, and replaced them with his proper garments.

This done, he rejoined his friends, who were exchanging congratulations on their fortunate escape.

Lightfoot produced a quantity of dried venison, which he set before them.

"Sorry I haven't anything better fer you," he remarked, apologetically; "but, not knowin' when I should be hyar again, I neglected ter leave much of a supply. But dried meat is better than nothin', so pitch in, fer you must both be half-starved."

His companions needed no urging; with keen appetites, they helped the ranger do ample justice to the venison.

While thus engaged, the young ranger was busy arranging his plans for the future.

Now that Louise Lester and Garland were safe, his work in that vicinity was accomplished.

The beleaguered settlers required his attention, now, and the youth was anxious to return to the island.

He determined to start right away, taking Guy, whose services would be needed at the island.

As for Louise, he intended to leave her at the cave for the present, deeming this the safest place.

But something occurred that materially altered the ranger's plans.

All this time, the faint cries of their pursuers on the outside had penetrated to their ears, but Little Lightfoot, deeming their position secure, had given them little heed.

Suddenly there was a whoop of unusual loudness, followed by an unbroken silence.

The ranger listened in evident uneasiness.

"I don't like that fur a cent," he muttered. "Pears ter me thar's some 'tarnal mischief afoot. Reckon I'll peek out an' see what ther pesky varmints are up ter."

Leaving his companions, the young scout stole cautiously through the passage.

Just as he reached the end, and put out his hand to part the vines, a tufted head suddenly

popped up, and the snaky orbs of a Sioux warrior glared into his own.

It is difficult to say who was the more surprised at this mutual discovery—the Wood Pilot or the Indian.

The former started back with a low cry of dismay, while the warrior, uttering an astonished "Ugh!" instantly disappeared as if by magic.

The boy ranger, recovering from his amazement, drew his knife and watched for the reappearance of the savage.

However, he did not again show himself; doubtless he had descended to acquaint his comrades of his discovery.

Little Lightfoot uttered a low signal that brought Guy Garland to his side.

He quickly told the young man of his unwelcome discovery.

Guy turned pale; he did not fear for himself, but for the helpless girl back in the chamber.

"What shall we do?" he demanded, excitedly.

Lightfoot, as cool as ever, responded deliberately:

"We kin take our choice atwixt leavin' by the other tunnel or stayin' hyar."

"Then let us leave, by all means," urged Garland. "The savages will lose no time in forcing an entrance into this place, and then we shall be completely at their mercy."

But the ranger shook his head, promptly.

"We're safer hyar than in ther woods," he declared. "Burdened with ther gal, ther chances are that we'd all git gobbled up, fur you must bear in mind that ther woods around ther island are chock-full of red-skins."

"But we will certainly be captured if we remain here," persisted Guy.

"Don't be so sure o' that," answered the scout, confidently. "True, ther varmints hev discovered whar we are; but they haven't got their dirty paws on us yet, not by a long shot, an' I reckon they'll hev ter be mighty smart ter do it."

"Do you think we can prevent them from effecting an entrance?"

"We kin try, at any rate; an' I miss my guess if we don't succeed. Only one kin come up the ladder at a time, an' we kin sit hyar an' pick 'em off as fast as they show ther ugly heads."

Seeing the force of the boy's reasoning, Guy Garland yielded without further argument.

Bidding Guy watch the entrance, Lightfoot crept into the inner apartment, quickly returning with a quantity of weapons, which he threw down upon the rocky floor.

"We ain't bad off fur tools," he exclaimed; "four pistols, a rifle, and plenty o' knives an' hatchets that'll come in handy at close quarters, in case our firearms give out. With these we oughter give a good account ov ourselves."

The two youths at once proceeded to examine their arms, and speedily had them loaded and ready for use.

The torch in the cavern was extinguished, and the place was wrapped in gloom.

At the entrance to the tunnel a few rays of light—for it was now morning—straggled in through the vines.

Thanks to this, it was possible to see the savages if they appeared at the opening.

Crouching on the rocky floor, with a pistol clutched in either hand, the Pilot of the Wood and his companion watched and waited, with their eyes fastened on the entrance.

The moments dragged by in silence. Half an hour passed, and not a sound was heard from the Sioux.

Guy Garland began to grow more hopeful. He believed the savages were afraid to attack them, and perhaps they had withdrawn from the vicinity altogether.

The more experienced young scout, however, was not to be misled.

He knew the wily tricks of the enemy, and to him the silence was ominous.

That the red-skins were at work he had not the least doubt, and not even for a moment did he allow his eyes to wander from the opening.

Suddenly a dark shadow flitted across the entrance to the tunnel, as the topknot of a venturesome savage appeared.

It was a truly unlucky move for the warrior.

Quick as a flash, Lightfoot raised his weapon and pulled trigger.

The report rung loudly through the passage, and the savage, releasing his hold, disappeared without a cry.

The bullet had struck him plumb in the middle of his painted forehead, and the next instant there was a loud splash, as the body of the fated savage struck the water below.

"That brave hes made his last investigation

on this earth," remarked the young ranger, coolly, as he watched for another red-skin.

Five minutes passed, but no more of the Sioux had ventured to show their heads.

The fate of their comrade told them that the whites were on the alert.

Presently a dark object appeared at the opening. Guy Garland saw it, and instantly blazed away.

The object disappeared, while a derisive howl followed.

"Be careful," Lightfoot warned his companion. "That was no red-skin at all; only a trick ter draw our fire. They're cunnin' imps."

Guy was chagrined at his mistake, and determined that it should not occur again.

The moments slowly passed.

Now and then a head or hand would suddenly flash before the entrance to the passage, only to be as quickly withdrawn.

The object of the red-skins was to draw the fire of the whites, but the latter were too sharp to waste their ammunition in that manner.

Once, however, when a savage, more venturesome than the others, exposed his entire arm and shoulder, Little Lightfoot could not resist the temptation.

Quick as lightning his weapon spoke, and the savage retreated down the ladder with a shattered arm.

The Sioux, finding that the two whites were not to be deceived, soon ceased their gyrations and once more a deathlike silence settled over all.

"I guess the rascals will give up in disgust after meeting with such a warm reception," whispered Guy Garland, elatedly. "No savage, unless he possesses a hide of steel, can enter this tunnel in the face of our fire."

"Don't shout until you're out o' ther woods, pard," enjoined Lightfoot. "You don't know the pesky varmints as I do."

"For which I am thankful," returned Guy, fervently. "I've already seen too much of the red fiends to suit my tastes."

"An' you're liable ter see a good deal more ov 'em, afore you git to a place of safety. We ain't through with ther p'ison imps yet, not by a jugful."

"But what, in your opinion will be their next move? I think the fact that they cannot force their way through this passage is pretty well established."

"Yas; they can't reach us by maneuvering the way they hev done, not as long as our ammunition lasts. Even after that was gone, I think we could keep 'em off with the hatchets. But thar's more'n one way ter skin a cat. A Sioux Injun kin conjure up more tricks than you kin shake a stick at. I tell you, them red-skins are bound to finger our skulps, even if they hev ter dig down through the bluff ter git us."

"They shall not if I can help it," declared Guy. "I'll never be taken alive, at any rate."

"If 'twan't fur ther gal, we could easily slip outer ther other end an' skip; but she is hyar, an' I'll allow we'll fight fur her to ther last. If the 'tarnal varmints git her, they'll travel over my dead body."

"And I'm with you to the death."

"Give me your hand, pard."

The two brave young men shook hands over the solemn compact.

Once more they lapsed into silence, keeping a vigilant watch upon the entrance.

Fully half an hour passed without a sound from the savages outside.

Then, suddenly, there was a commotion, and a large object was rolled into the opening.

"Hello!" exclaimed Little Lightfoot in surprise. "What are our red friends up to, now?"

"Trying to shut us up in here, I believe," answered Garland.

The object was a large, round stone; how the savages had managed to lift it to its present position was a mystery to our friends, but with indomitable energy, they had succeeded.

There it lay, almost completely blocking up the passage, there being a space of about a foot between the top of the stone and the roof of the tunnel.

Upon rolling the stone in, the Sioux had expressed their exultation by a chorus of shrill whoops, then again lapsing into silence.

Silently Lightfoot and his friend watched the narrow opening through which the light penetrated.

Suddenly they uttered an exclamation of dismay. The rock was moving!

Instantly the truth burst upon them.

The Sioux, with devilish ingenuity, were rolling the stone in upon the beleaguered whites, themselves sheltered behind it, seeking in this novel manner to corner and capture them.

CHAPTER XI.

SIoux STRATEGY.

THE adoption of this laborious plan told how determined the Sioux were to capture the whites, and Guy Garland, as the truth flashed through his mind, felt that the assertion of Little Lightfoot regarding the ingenuity of the red-skins, was by no means exaggerated.

A cry of despair broke from the young man's bloodless lips.

Even the young ranger lost his usual coolness for once.

On came the stone, slowly but surely, inch by inch.

Behind it were two of the Indians, pushing, and they, in turn, were followed by their comrades.

Guy Garland nervously clutched the arm of the ranger.

"For God's sake, let me make haste and get out of this accursed place!" he whispered. "The fiends will soon be within the cavern. Better to brave the dangers of the forest than to await certain capture."

Lightfoot stared at the moving rock, and made no reply.

Suddenly a gleam shot into the eyes of the young ranger.

"No; we will not leave the cave yet," he exclaimed, all his coolness returning as if by magic. "I hev a plan that's worth two o' that. Come with me! I reckon we kin roll stones as well as ther Injuns kin."

Wonderingly Guy followed the scout, as he hurried into the chamber; then the youth's meaning was made clear.

Seizing the stone that concealed the opening to the other passage, Little Lightfoot pulled it from its position.

Aided by Garland, he then rolled it out to meet the one being advanced by the Indians.

The block of stone was exactly the same width as the passage, and, exerting their entire strength, the young men succeeded in wedging the mass in firmly between the walls.

Lightfoot surveyed their work with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"I reckon," said he, grimly, "that when ther varmints git about hyar they'll run against a snag. They'll hev more stones ter roll than they bargained for, I'll allow."

Eagerly the two awaited the result of this counter movement.

They could plainly hear the labored breathing of the red-skins, as they pushed away at their novel breastwork, drawing nearer slowly but steadily.

Soon there was a grinding sound as the two stones came together.

Those in the cavern could hear the surprised exclamations of the warriors, as they tugged and pushed and grunted in their efforts to advance.

But their course was effectually checked; the exertion of their utmost strength was not sufficient to stir the massive wedge, so well placed by the beleaguered ones.

Our friends were in ecstasies, and the Wood Pilot laughed mockingly at the futile attempts of his enemies to force the barrier.

In the underground chamber all were as composed as could be expected, considering that a tunnel-full of bloodthirsty Sioux warriors were almost within arm's-length of them; but with that barrier of rock separating them, they were about as safe as if the red-skins were a mile away.

Meanwhile, not a sound came from the red-men in the passage; and from their silence alone, Lightfoot concluded that they were plotting fresh deviltry.

They were not obliged to wait long to learn its nature.

Presently a peculiar odor assailed their nostrils; both noticed it at the same moment.

"What's that I smell?" queried Garland, sniffing the atmosphere suspiciously.

"Smoke!" was Lightfoot's laconic answer.

He comprehended the truth in a minute.

It was another Sioux trick, and one that the youth was not unfamiliar with.

The savages had collected a quantity of combustible material in the tunnel, and fired it; then upon it they threw a blanket, dampened in the river, and retired to await developments.

Their intention was to smoke the fugitives out like foxes.

The Sioux meant well enough, but there was one thing that was entirely left out of their calculations; they were ignorant of the fact that there was a second means of egress from the cave.

The smoke rolled over the top of the barrier.

cade in a dense black mass, completely filling the chamber.

"Jehosaphat!" sputtered Lightfoot, half-choked. "This is mighty unpleasant. I reckon we'd better ramose to a less smoky clime. We'd soon suffocate where we are."

The little party hastily entered the tunnel.

The cloud of smoke relentlessly pursued them.

Stumbling along in the darkness, they soon arrived at the end of the passage.

Here the pure air, entering at the top of the shaft, drove back the smoke, and they were enabled to breathe more freely.

The little party waited several minutes in silence.

Suddenly a loud noise came from the interior of the cavern, followed by a chorus of shrill, exultant yells.

The boy ranger uttered a cry of dismay, for he rightly guessed what had happened.

The savages, suspecting the truth, had blown the barricade into pieces, and were now within the cave.

From their loud cries it was evident that they were rapidly approaching.

The hand of fate was against our friends.

Step by step they had been driven from the place where they had deemed themselves safe, until now the only course left was to take to the forest.

Danger awaited them there, equal in magnitude to that they left behind, but there was a bare chance of reaching the island in safety.

Not a second of time was to be lost.

Little Lightfoot quickly led the way up the ladder, while Garland followed, bearing the maiden in his arms.

The boy ranger coolly drew the ladder up after them.

"A point in our favor," he remarked. "It'll take ther varmints some time ter climb out."

Without hesitation, he led the way through the forest.

Guy and Louise followed hand in hand.

It had been his intention to carry the girl, but she insisted upon walking; and, thanks to her early out-door training, she kept up a pace that both surprised and pleased her friends.

The little party pushed through the woods at a rapid pace, and aimed directly for the island.

Suddenly a chorus of yells reached their ears from behind.

The savages had succeeded in getting out of the shaft. They would now be in hot pursuit.

The fugitives increased their speed; on they went, casting frequent apprehensive glances behind them.

Presently the savages appeared in sight some distance behind.

Upon sighting the fugitives, they uttered exultant whoops, and came on with renewed vigor.

Guy Garland snatched up the form of the maiden, and they dashed through the forest with the speed and desperation of those who knew, that life is at stake.

Had Little Lightfoot been alone, he could have laughed at his pursuers; but, as it was, he would not leave Garland, who, burdened with the girl, was unable to make such rapid progress.

On they dashed through the tangled undergrowth, pursued and pursued, and it was soon evident to the latter that their foes were getting the best of the chase.

The eyes of the Wood Pilot gleamed fiercely as he observed this, and he clutched his pistol with the determination that, even if overtaken, he would not surrender as long as he could lift a finger in defense.

Garland's pale, resolute countenance and flashing eyes told that he was no less determined.

Suddenly, with fierce yells, three Sioux warriors sprung up from the bushes directly in front of the fugitives, wildly brandishing their tomahawks.

The red-skins in the rear howled triumphantly at the appearance of the new-comers.

But Lightfoot was undaunted in the face of this new peril.

Like a flash his arm was raised, and at the sharp crack of his pistol one of the red-skins fell with a shattered brain.

As rapidly as he could pull trigger, the youth discharged the remaining barrel of his weapon.

Swift as was his aim, the bullet was not wasted, and a second savage went to grass, uttering his death-yell.

Transformed into a perfect demon by the excitement, the young ranger whipped out his knife, and leaped like a tiger upon the remaining red-skin.

The Sioux aimed a ferocious blow at his head with a hatchet, but Lightfoot avoided it, and

the next instant his keen blade was buried in the brawny breast of the warrior.

All this was done in much less time than it has taken to relate it, and the flight of the fugitives was scarcely checked.

Maddened by the terrible havoc caused by the ranger, the Sioux strained every nerve to overtake their foes.

The fugitives pushed on despairingly; the Indians were gaining rapidly, their exultant shouts ringing in their ears like the knell of doom.

Suddenly another sound was heard, rising high above the yells of the pursuing savages.

It was the roar of the cataract.

A moment later, the fugitives arrived upon the shore, just below the rocks and whirlpools of the Devil's Churn.

A glad cry burst from the lips of the ranger as they reached the stream.

A number of canoes were drawn up on the bank.

It was but the work of a minute for Guy to deposit his burden in one of the vessels.

Then he turned to the assistance of the ready-witted ranger, who was pushing the other canoes off into the river.

This was quickly accomplished, and then, pushing off their craft, they leaped in, just as the red-skins thundered down upon the shore in hot pursuit.

Snatching up a paddle, Little Lightfoot sent the light craft out into the center of the stream, while Guy Garland, his arms no longer burdened, drew a pistol and fired at the red-skins, as they howled and danced upon the shore.

The shot took effect, and one of the scoundrels, ceased his noise forever, while the others whooped in their anger until the forest resounded.

Reaching the center of the river, the Pilot of the Woods turned the prow of the canoe downstream, and, propelled by paddle and current, the frail craft shot swiftly over the water.

However, the red-skins were not to be baffled so easily.

Several of them plunged into the water, and swam in pursuit of the drifting canoes.

They succeeded in recovering two of them, and quickly returned in them to their comrades; the latter leaped in and paddled swiftly after the fugitives.

This proceeding consumed time, and the whites obtained a fair start.

Unfortunately, there was but one paddle in their canoe, so Garland was powerless to assist the young ranger; however, with ready weapons, he watched for an opportunity to harass the pursuers.

But the distance was too great for accurate shooting, the rapid motion of the canoe also being a great disadvantage, and after one or two ineffectual shots, Guy wisely refrained from further waste of ammunition.

Down the river sped the two parties, their speed being about equal.

True, the Indians had more hands at the paddles, but the heavy load of the canoe made their locomotion slower, thus counterbalancing the advantage.

Taking everything into consideration, the fugitives had an excellent prospect of reaching the island, which was less than half a mile away, in advance of their pursuers.

With sweeping, powerful strokes, the ranger urged the canoe down the river; his companion kept up a vigilant watch, while Louise Lester crouched silently in the stern.

Suddenly Garland uttered an exclamation of dismay, as he pointed to the shore.

The cry was echoed by Little Lightfoot, as he cast a rapid glance in the direction indicated.

Another party of Sioux had made their appearance upon the bank, at a point a short distance below the fugitives.

Prominent among them were to be recognized Black Raven, the renegade, and White Rattlesnake, the redoubtable Sioux chieftain.

They had been attracted to the river by the firing, and had arrived just in time to take a part in the exciting scene that was being enacted before them.

Fully a dozen of the warriors plunged into the water, and swam out to intercept the canoe of the whites.

Their comrades up the river greeted their appearance with a chorus of exultant whoops, and redoubled their exertions from an inordinate desire to be in at the death.

The situation of the three fugitives was rendered extremely critical by this unexpected change in the phase of affairs.

If the savages reached the center of the stream in time to intercept them, capture was certain. Once more the hopes of our friends were precipitated to zero.

Lightfoot's eyes flashed, as he took in the thrilling situation, and he compressed his lips resolutely.

If they failed to pass the critical point, it would be no fault of his.

With renewed energy he plied the paddle, and under his herculean efforts, the canoe fairly skimmed over the water.

Yelling fiercely, the Indians swam like beavers.

The seconds flew by. Lightfoot wielded his paddle desperately.

From the shore, White Rattlesnake and the renegade urged on their warriors.

It was an exciting situation for all concerned.

The savages were now strung out in a line, the most powerful swimmers being in advance, while the others lagged behind.

Guy Garland, in the bow of the boat, anxiously watched their progress.

As the moments flew by, it became apparent that the canoe with its occupants would reach the objective point at exactly the same time as would the foremost of the Indians.

Gripping a pistol in either hand, Garland nerved himself for action.

The critical moment arrived.

Whooping with demoniac exultance, the redskins surged round the canoe.

As rapidly as he could pull trigger, Guy discharged his weapons.

He fired almost without aim, but at such close range, and with such an ample target, it was next to impossible to miss; two savages sunk beneath the surface of the stream, and two more were severely injured by the biting lead.

Dropping his now empty weapons, Garland drew his knife and aimed a furious blow at a warrior who was endeavoring to climb into the craft.

With a horrible yell of agony, the savage released his hold and disappeared.

At this moment two burly bucks seized the side of the canoe, near the stern, and clung with dogged persistence, threatening to overturn the craft and upset its occupants into the river.

But Little Lightfoot was on the alert.

He brought his paddle down upon them with terrific force, and the warriors dropped off with crushed skulls.

This hot reception rather demoralized the Sioux, and the young ranger, improving his opportunity, forced the canoe clear of the yelling, struggling pack.

During this brief but sanguinary conflict, the speed of the canoe had been checked, and the Indians in the canoes had been enabled to close up a good portion of the gap that separated them.

So, when the whites at length managed to get clear of the redskins in the water, they discovered that the other party was less than forty yards away, and bearing down upon them like the wind.

"Jehosaphat!" panted the Wood Pilot. "We ain't outer ther woods, yet. Ther's got ter be some mighty lively work around hyar, if ye want ter escape. Givo 'em ther benefit o' yer pistols, pard, an' shoot ter kill."

While speaking, the young ranger bent to his work with unabated energy, and once more the little craft was sent flying down the stream.

As fast as he could load and fire, Guy Garland kept up a hot fusillade upon the pursuing party, but, though several of the savages were hit, the speed of the canoes was not checked.

The Indians did not return the fire, for fear of injuring the white girl, and, for this reason, the youths knew that they were safe enough until they were overhauled.

On sped the three canoes, the redskins gaining slowly but surely; their united strength was too much for the overtaxed muscles of the young ranger.

Rounding a sharp bend in the river, the island, their haven of refuge, was revealed.

The settlers were gathered in a group, attracted by the firing, and a loud shout went up as they caught sight of the fugitives.

The prospect of safety endowed Lightfoot with almost superhuman strength, and he actually began to draw away from the savages, who, with dogged persistence, followed almost down to the island; but a volley from the settlers warned them that they were in range, and they discreetly withdrew, howling with rage and disappointment.

The fugitives were safe at last.

CHAPTER XII.

IN AND OUT OF DIFFICULTY.

THE joy of the emigrants at the deliverance of Louise Lester was almost unbounded.

Little Lightfoot had kept his word; his mission was successfully accomplished, and Philip Lester was profuse in his words of thanks.

The hand of the brave young ranger was shaken until it ached, and Guy Garland, too, came in for a good share of the praise.

Lightfoot learned that the Sioux had made no hostile movement during his absence, and this information caused some surprise on his part.

But he was confident that an attack was soon to be made, and he ordered a vigilant watch kept on the water in every direction, for it was hard telling at what point the cunning savages would make their appearance.

The coming of the borderer had cheered the settlers immensely, and every man was in good spirits.

The hours passed: huge banks of black, ominous clouds, swiftly gathering, told of the approach of a storm, while the low rumble of distant thunder occasionally reached the ears of the beleaguered settlers.

Presently the rain began to descend in large, pelted drops; crouching under the rocks, where they were partially sheltered from the storm, the settlers waited patiently.

Thus the moments passed until the day was nearly at a close; but no movement was made by the enemy.

Their signals had ceased altogether, and the forest seemed to be wholly deserted.

The ranger, however, knew that such was not the case. This ominous silence on the part of the savages had its meaning to him.

He knew full well that the Sioux were busily engaged in plotting the destruction of himself and friends.

What their plans were he had no idea; but the bold youth determined to find out.

Tiring of this state of inactivity, he was resolved to penetrate to the midst of the redskins, and learn their plans if possible.

It was a daring movement, and one that was fraught with great danger; but, if he succeeded, the advantage of knowing the intentions of the Sioux would more than repay him for the risk incurred.

As soon as darkness covered land and water with an inky pall, Lightfoot took leave of his friends and started upon his new adventure.

Swimming rapidly but noiselessly across the stream, he reached the shore in safety.

Here he paused for a moment and listened; nothing could be heard of the redskins.

The only sound that reached his ears was the patter of the rain-drops on the leaves.

Satisfied that there were no redskins in the immediate vicinity, Lightfoot moved cautiously ahead.

He was ignorant of the exact whereabouts of the band of White Rattlesnake, but felt that they were not a great distance away.

The youth stealthily made his way through the woods in a direction where he judged the savages to be situated.

He did not guess amiss, for, ten minutes later, the light of a fire met his watchful eye. His foes were close at hand.

The Sioux were encamped in a snug little spot between two boulders, where they were well protected from the storm; sheltered by the overhanging rock, the fire burned cheerfully, and around it the savages now reduced to less than two-score, were congregated. The tall figures of White Rattlesnake and the renegade were conspicuous among the number.

So much was visible to the Wood Pilot from his position twenty yards distant; but the youth was not content with this.

The redskins were conversing earnestly, and he was determined to know what they were saying.

To think was to act with the daring young ranger, and the next moment he was crawling stealthily toward the fire.

Fortune favored the youth, and, without making the slightest noise that would betray his presence, he managed to gain a position on the top of one of the boulders overlooking the camp.

"Here, in this perilous position, he crouched in breathless excitement, peering down upon the redskins and listening attentively.

Black Raven, the renegade, was speaking in the Sioux tongue.

"I'm against your plan, brother," he said to the Sioux chief, "for I don't believe it would succeed. True, we outnumber the whites nearly four to one, but they are strongly posted, and could beat off our warriors in the event of an open attack in canoes.

"What, then, would Black Raven advise?" inquired White Rattlesnake.

"We must resort to strategy. I have a scheme that I think will work. Listen! We will--"

The renegade did not finish, for suddenly his speech was interrupted in a novel and quite unexpected manner.

In his eagerness to catch every word that was uttered, Little Lightfoot had leaned forward a little too far for safety.

The result was that he lost his equilibrium, and, with a cry of dismay, tumbled upon the heads of the astonished redskins.

A lively scene ensued.

The savage who had served to break the ranger's fall, rolled off into the fire, from which he scrambled, yelling in pain and fright; his companions scattered with alacrity, thinking for the moment that a grizzly had suddenly jumped into their midst.

Meanwhile, Lightfoot, the cause of the disturbance, had bounded to his feet like a rubber ball, not in the least injured by his unlucky tumble.

Concluding that the vicinity was too warm for comfort, the young ranger turned to flee, just as the Sioux comprehending how matters stood, rushed whooping upon him.

Unfortunately the boy stumbled and fell heavily, but he was upon his feet again in a moment. Too late, however, for the redskins now surrounded him.

He had no time to draw a weapon, but, undaunted by his disheartening position, he struck out vigorously with his fists.

Several of the savages fell back with blackened eyes and bleeding noses, but, with such fearful odds against him, resistance was useless, and the brave young ranger was soon in the power of his enemies.

Powerless to resist, Little Lightfoot was placed with his back to a neighboring tree, to which he was secured by a couple of stout thongs passing around his breast and ankles.

As may be imagined, the Indians were delighted at the present state of affairs. The daredevil young ranger, who had been a continual thorn in their path, and who had adroitly eluded them scores of times, was hopelessly in their power at last!

The situation of the youth was extremely unpleasant, surrounded by merciless foes, and with the rain pelting into his face with a force that nearly took his breath away; and inwardly he condemned the imprudence that had brought him into such a dangerous position.

However, critical as his situation was, the spirits of the young scout were too buoyant to admit of despair.

He believed that "while there's life there's hope," and met the taunts and gibes of his exultant captors with a smile of scorn.

To add to the discomfiture of the young ranger, the warriors began to amuse themselves by throwing knives and tomahawks at his form, their object being to come as near as possible without drawing blood.

This is a popular amusement among the savages, and affords them great sport, but the unlucky prisoner must needs have nerves of steel to face it without flinching.

However, Little Lightfoot evinced not the slightest trace of uneasiness, as he coolly watched the keen weapons hurtling through the air, some of them striking almost within a hair's-breadth of his skin.

He knew that the Sioux were usually unerring throwers of the knife or hatchet, and so felt no fear of being struck by the flying missiles.

The Indian braves kept up their sport with unabated zeal.

Suddenly the heart of the captive youth gave an eager throb, for he had made a welcome discovery.

A hatchet, hurled by a savage hand, had just struck so close to his side that the keen edge of the weapon half-severed the thong that bound the young ranger to the tree.

Lightfoot's heart beat with increased hope, as the warrior recovered his weapon without discovering the result of his throw.

By a vigorous movement of the elbows, it would be an easy task to complete the work partly done by the hatchet, and the ranger patiently waited for a favorable opportunity to arrive.

Soon his patience was rewarded, for the warriors, tiring of their sport, put up their weapons and resumed their places by the fire.

Now was the time for action!

With a quick, energetic movement, Little Lightfoot burst the thong that pinioned his arms.

So rapidly was the movement executed that it escaped the eyes of the savages by the fire.

Little Lightfoot's arms were now at liberty, but his lower limbs were still pinioned to the tree.

The next thing was to free them.

The savages had taken away all his belt weapons, but within a pocket in the youth's buckskin shirt was a small clasp-knife.

Cautiously drawing it out, the ranger opened the blade, and then, assuming his former attitude, anxiously awaited a favorable opportunity to use it.

The red-skins, engrossed in conversation, paid but little attention to their prisoner, and seizing a moment when their eyes were turned in another direction, Little Lightfoot stooped swiftly and severed the remaining thong with a single slash of the knife.

The next instant he had assumed his old position, with his back to the tree and his hands by his side, but, to all appearances, his rapid operation had not been observed by the red-skins by the fire.

But as the youth was about to congratulate himself on his success, a burly warrior suddenly arose to his feet, and strode straight toward him.

As though suspecting the truth, the savage advanced with his glittering eyes fixed on the young ranger.

The suspicious warrior would certainly discover the truth if he came nearer, so Lightfoot instantly resolved to take the initiative.

Like a panther leaping upon its prey, the lithe scout bounded on the warrior, aiming a furious blow with his fist.

The next instant the daring youth was in the very midst of the party, dealing blows to the right and left.

So sudden and impetuous was his rush, that incredible though it may seem, he fairly cleared the circle of warriors ere the latter were hardly aware of the fact that he was at liberty.

A moment later the youth was dashing through the forest, with the infuriated Sioux close at his heels.

Once fairly out of their clutches, Little Lightfoot felt more secure, trusting to his superior fleetness for escape.

As he darted lightly among the trees, his taunting laugh was wafted back to the pursuers, who, wild with fury, responded with blood-curdling yells as they strained every nerve to overtake their bold young foe.

Bounding on like a startled fawn, Lightfoot pointed straight for the river, and in less than five minutes reached the shore, plunging into the stream just as the foremost of his pursuers dashed up.

The latter promptly hauled a canoe out from among the rushes where it had been concealed; half a dozen braves leaped into the craft and paddled swiftly in pursuit.

The others remained on the bank, and urged on their comrades with whoop and yell.

Lightfoot, meantime, was swimming toward the island with quick, powerful strokes.

Turning his head, he was enabled to see, by the lightning's flash, the canoe full of warriors racing down upon him.

The youth had not calculated on a canoe being brought into play by his enemies, and an exclamation of dismay escaped his lips.

Straining every nerve, he forged through the water with increased speed; but the savages had a vast advantage, and they were rapidly overhauling him.

Before the young ranger had covered half the distance between the shore and the island, the Sioux canoe was close upon him.

A brawny savage crouched in the prow, in readiness to clutch the swimmer by the hair.

But even then Little Lightfoot did not despair.

As the warrior leaned forward to grasp him, the youth, drawing a long breath, sunk beneath the surface, just as the canoe rushed over the spot where his head had been.

A moment later he rose to the surface, to find himself right alongside of the canoe.

The Indians had ceased paddling, and the little craft lay almost motionless upon the water.

Grasping it Lightfoot rocked it violently, and as a natural result, the canoe filled with water and sunk, leaving its occupants struggling in the middle of the stream.

The boy ranger was in their very midst, but before he could evade their grasp he was seized by a muscular savage.

Then ensued a brief but desperate struggle for mastery, the combatants thrashing about in the water like a couple of stranded porpoises.

The other savages came to the relief of their

comrade, and it seemed as if Lightfoot was doomed to recapture, after all.

The thought endowed him with almost superhuman strength, and, making a desperate effort he managed to throw off the grasp of his adversary, and as the others closed in, in a tangled mass, the boy sunk beneath the surface, coming up, a moment later, a full dozen yards beyond his foes—a feat of under-water swimming he had often accomplished. Still struggling together, the savages did not discover the boy's head until too late to reach him, so he swiftly swam to the shore, and with a triumphant whoop disappeared in the dense woods.

CHAPTER XIII.

FIGHTING FOR LIFE.

SAFE from further pursuit, Lightfoot swam leisurely to the island, his taunting laugh answering the yells of the discomfited red-skins, as they angrily retraced their way to the opposite shore and rejoined their companions.

Reaching the island, the brave youth was heartily welcomed by his friends, who, attracted by the shouting, had awaited the result of the pursuit with no little anxiety.

"All safe an' sound, pards," declared the ranger, laughing lightly. "I had a mighty close shave, I opine, but I managed to squeeze through with a hull skin."

"What did you learn concerning the future movements of the Indians?" inquired Philip Lester, eagerly.

"Nary thing," answered the youth, disgustedly. "The king-pin, Black Raven, war jest agoin' ter spin out his plans, but jest then occurred an unlucky accident that spilted ther hull bizness. Plague take ther luck!"

The young ranger then proceeded to give his listeners a minute account of his perilous adventures since leaving the island.

Little Lightfoot was greatly disappointed at the ill-success of his venture. He had incurred great danger, had been in one of the most critical positions of his life, and the result was that he knew no more about the intentions of the Sioux than he did before starting out.

The settlers watched for an attack, which they expected would follow the escape of the ranger, but the red-skins made no demonstration beyond a few disapproving whoops.

These soon ceased, and once more the noise of the storm was all that broke the silence.

Those on the island inferred from this that the Sioux had sought the shelter of the camp.

The beleaguered settlers watched and waited impatiently. Under the circumstances, sleep was impossible.

The beating rain drenched them to the skin, and it was only with the utmost difficulty that they managed to keep their fire-arms dry.

In this uncomfortable manner the night was passed.

With the coming of morning the storm began to show signs of abatement, and at midday the rain ceased to fall altogether.

Wet to the skin and shivering with cold, the discomfited settlers crouched within their fortification; everything upon the island was completely drenched, so a fire was out of the question.

Swollen by the rain, the river rushed by with unusual turbulency, bearing on its heaving bosom quantities of debris washed from the shores above the island.

Among this were a number of logs. Borne by the current down the center of the stream, they pointed straight for the island. Most of them struck the bank, and were anchored among the rocks and reeds.

Soon there were fully a dozen large logs bobbing against the shore.

Little Lightfoot was the first to observe them. "I reckon we've got a use fur them logs," he exclaimed, immediately. "They're jest ther thing ter strengthen our position with."

It was a good idea, and all hands at once sallied out to bring in the anchored timber.

But as they reached the shore, the settlers suddenly made a most unwelcome discovery.

Every one of those logs concealed from three to a dozen savages!

This, then, was the renegade's cunning scheme which Little Lightfoot had been so unfortunately prevented from overhearing. It was the intention of the crafty red-skins to remain concealed until night, and then steal upon the whites under cover of darkness; but the suggestion of the young ranger had led to their early discovery.

Seeing that they were discovered, the Sioux

leaped from their concealment like so many fiends, greeting the whites with a series of blood-curdling yells.

For a moment the settlers stood as if spell-bound, too astonished at their startling discovery to move.

Then the clarion voice of Little Lightfoot rung out high above the whoops of the exultant red-skins.

"Back!" he yelled. "Back to the rocks, for your lives!"

His ringing voice roused the settlers to a sense of their danger.

Wheeling, they dashed for the rocks, with the Sioux warriors close at their heels.

Fear lent wings to their flight, and they reached a point behind their breastwork with the red-skins not half a dozen yards behind.

Grasping their rifles, they turned and delivered a murderous volley in the very faces of their foes.

At such close range no aim was necessary, and scarcely a shot was wasted.

Five of the savages bit the dust, while several others were wounded more or less severely.

In the face of this murderous fire the Sioux wavered.

The settlers promptly discharged the remaining barrel of their rifles with deadly effect.

This hot reception caused the red-skins to fall back precipitately.

However, they were by no means discouraged.

Urged on by White Rattlesnake and the renegade, they immediately returned to the assault, spreading out and attacking the whites on all sides at once.

The settlers had no time to reload their rifles, and were compelled to resort to their pistols.

Up dashed the Sioux warriors eager for the scalps of the whites, and the next instant a most exciting combat ensued.

The fierce whoops of the savages and the defiant shouts of the determined settlers, mingled with the sharp, spiteful crack of the firearms and the whistling of bullets.

The red-skins were fighting for scalps and plunder; the whites for life and liberty.

Piercer grew the struggle for the mastery.

Louder rose the noise of battle, until it seemed as though ten thousand demons were holding high carnival on the usually quiet island.

As fast as they could pull trigger, the settlers plied their weapons.

More than one painted warrior went screeching to the earth before the biting lead, but this did not deter the survivors.

Led on by their chiefs, they swarmed around the mound of rocks in the face of the hot fusillade, rendered all the more furious by the loss of their brother warriors.

The pistols of the whites were soon empty.

The Sioux perceived this from the fact that the firing had ceased, and they screeched with renewed vigor.

But the settlers were not yet vanquished.

With knives and pistol-butts, they fought fiercely to beat back the surging band of red-skins.

They struggled with the desperation of men who know that every thing is at stake.

High above the sounds of the conflict rose the clarion voice of Little Lightfoot, encouraging his friends, as he wielded his clubbed rifle with fatal effect.

Savage after savage reeled back with a crushed skull before his terrible blows.

By his side, grim and determined, Guy Garland fought like a hero.

Louise Lester was crouching behind a boulder, pale and trembling with fear, safe from flying missiles, but with the sounds of the terrible contest ringing in her delicate ears like the knell of doom.

The battle raged with unabated violence, but the critical point was soon reached.

In spite of the almost superhuman efforts of the desperate settlers, the Sioux, who outnumbered them still three to one, began to slowly, but surely force their way over the rocky breastwork.

The whites were in despair. Capture or death seemed inevitable.

But at this critical moment, a loud shout suddenly reached their ears.

Casting a rapid glance in the direction from which the sound had emanated, the hard-pressed settlers beheld a sight that caused a cry of joy to peal from their lips.

A large canoe, filled with men in buckskin, was racing down the river, paddled by a dozen muscular arms.

Near the prow of the craft could be seen the

familiar figure of Ebony Dick, the missing African.

Little Lightfoot uttered a loud "hurrah!" as he instantly recognized the new-comers.

They were a party of trappers from Eagle Bluffs, and among them was Iowa Jack, whom Black Raven had so successfully impersonated.

Doubtless, they had fallen in with Ebony Dick, and learning from him the perilous situation of the settlers, had hurried down the river to the rescue.

"Hurrah!" yelled little Lightfoot, triumphantly. "Our luck has turned. Forward, pards, and give ther red varmints particular Hail Columby!"

Encouraged by the knowledge that aid was near at hand, the settlers responded with a will. Wielding their knives and clubbed rifles fiercely, they drove the Sioux warriors back over the breastwork.

Down came the canoe, skimming over the water like a bird, and the savages, amazed at the sudden appearance of the trappers, wavered perceptibly.

Quick to see their advantage, the whites pressed forward exultantly, driving the demoralized red-skins toward the shore.

At this moment the canoe grounded upon the shore, and the trappers, leaping from the craft, furiously assailed the Sioux in their rear.

Hemmed in on all sides by the whites, retreat was impossible.

Urged on by the cries of their leaders, however, the savages rallied and met the assault of the trappers fiercely.

They still outnumbered the whites, and as they fought with the fury of desperation, the result of the contest was still rather doubtful.

But the new-comers held the advantage, inasmuch as they possessed plenty of pistols, and they worked the tools with deadly skill.

The warriors went down, one by one, screeching wildly.

White Rattlesnake, the Sioux chieftain, by a desperate dash, managed to clear himself of his enemies.

Brandishing his blood-dripping knife, he darted for the water in an attempt to escape.

But Little Lightfoot perceived the movement, and with a bound he placed himself before the fugitive chief.

He had no weapon but his knife, but with this clutched firmly in his hand, he boldly confronted White Rattlesnake.

With eyes fiercely gleaming like those of a tiger, the Sioux chief rushed upon his slender antagonist, aiming a furious blow at his head with his dripping weapon.

But Little Lightfoot met the assault without flinching, neatly parrying the red-skin's savage stroke.

The next moment the two were engaged in a fierce set-to. Thrust and parry, parry and thrust, while the sparks flew from the gleaming blades as they clashed wickedly together.

The youth's friends were too busy to notice the single combat taking place behind them; the combatants had it all to themselves, with no chance for interference on either side.

After a minute of rapid work, the Sioux chief suddenly concentrated all his strength into one furious stroke.

The young ranger tried to parry it, but, to his dismay the weapon was sent flying from his hand.

The next instant White Rattlesnake was on him with uplifted knife, his wicked orbs glowing like those of the venomous reptile for which he was named.

But, though disarmed, Little Lightfoot was by no means conquered.

Swiftly ducking his head, he eluded the descending blow; the next instant he caught the arm of the savage and grappled with him fiercely.

However, the chief was greatly his superior in point of size and strength, and, though the youth made up in agility considerable of what he lacked in strength, he found that he had "caught a tartar."

Little Lightfoot would have fared badly, had not Providence interposed in his behalf.

White Rattlesnake suddenly slipped and fell, dragging his young antagonist to the ground with him.

The ranger was uppermost, and the head of the chief struck forcibly upon a stone.

The force of the blow confused and half-stunned the Sioux, and before he could recover, the agile young ranger had bound him securely, hand and foot.

Panting from his exertions, Little Lightfoot rose to his feet and surveyed his foe in triumph.

The young ranger had good reason to be proud of his victory.

For years White Rattlesnake had been the scourge of the northwest frontier; but now he was in the power of the whites, and his bloody career was checked.

CHAPTER XIV.

REVELATIONS.

MEANWHILE, Guy Garland, who, throughout the sanguine affray, had distinguished himself by deeds of valor, had been looking anxiously for Black Raven.

The renegade had disappeared.

Suddenly a stifled scream reached his ears.

Guy recognized the voice, and he turned with a cry of dismay.

At this moment the missing renegade appeared upon the rocks, bearing in his arms the struggling form of Louise Lester!

Black Raven had made a final attempt to regain possession of his coveted prize, and his cunning trick bid fair to succeed.

Tightly grasping his fair captive, the renegade darted for the opposite side of the island, with Guy Garland in pursuit.

The canoe in which the three fugitives had made their escape from the Indians, was still drawn up on the shore.

Leaping into this, the renegade pushed out into the stream, just as young Garland dashed up to the spot.

A loud laugh of triumph pealed from Black Raven's lips as the young man plunged into the water and swam determinedly after the receding canoe.

But the scoundrel laughed too soon. In his excitement he dropped the paddle, which immediately floated out of reach.

A furious curse burst from the lips of the ruffian.

The craft now had only the current to propel it, and Garland, being a rapid swimmer, was swiftly overhauling it.

A desperate gleam shot into the eyes of Black Raven, as he drew his knife, the only weapon that remained in his possession.

With one arm around the waist of his captive, he clutched the weapon nervously, and waited for his pursuer to come up.

Garland was rapidly gaining on the drifting canoe; the young man was wholly unarmed, having dropped his knife in his haste, but in his eagerness to rescue the maiden, he heeded not that fact.

Soon he was close upon the renegade.

As the youth swam up alongside, Black Raven aimed a furious blow at the head of his pursuer.

Louise, seeing the peril of her lover, tore herself free with a violent effort, and caught the descending arm of the renegade.

The knife was dashed from his hand, and sunk to the bottom of the stream, while Guy clutched Black Raven and tried to drag him from the canoe.

The frail craft was upset, and the trio found themselves floundering in the stream.

Louise Lester clung to the overturned craft, while Guy and the renegade, locked in a fierce embrace, struggled desperately for the mastery.

They splashed about, neither appearing to have the advantage; but, just then, two of the trappers came paddling down upon the scene.

They had witnessed the occurrence from the island, and swiftly put off to the young man's assistance.

As he caught sight of the approaching canoe, Black Raven struggled desperately to make his escape, but Guy clung to him with a grip of iron until his friends arrived.

Then, in spite of his fierce resistance, the discomfited renegade was dragged into the canoe and bound securely.

Louise Lester was assisted into the same strong canoe, and the party put back to the island.

Meanwhile, the sanguinary battle, so long and stubbornly contested, had been brought to a termination.

Victory rested with the whites at last, but it was dearly won.

Three of their number were slain, while not a man came out of the *melee* without more or less serious injuries.

As for the savages, a few had succeeded in making good their escape, but the remainder were mercilessly shot down by the triumphant trappers.

The powerful band of White Rattlesnake, long the terror of the Northwest settlements, was completely demoralized, and the chief himself, together with his detestable colleague, Black Raven, were helpless captives.

Surely, the whites had good cause to rejoice over their hard won triumph.

The first act of the victors was to attend to their wounds. This done, the bodies of their unfortunate companions were interred, the graves being covered with rocks to protect the remains from prowling beasts.

"What'll we do wi' all these red niggers?" demanded one of the trappers, as he indicated the bodies of the Indians that fairly covered the shore.

Iowa Jack pointed into the air, where a number of small black objects, looking like mere specks in the distance, were to be seen.

"Leave 'em hyar; that's all ther burial they need," he answered. "Ther buzzards hev scented a feast, a'ready, an' ev'ry bone 'll be picked clean afore we've b'en away from hyar ten hours."

So the bodies of the slain Sioux were permitted to remain as they had fallen.

The trappers now turned their attention to their two captives. What was to be done with them?

They had no mercy for these fiends in human shape; nothing but their death would in any degree atone for the atrocious deeds they had committed, but the men differed in their opinions as to how the wretches should be disposed of.

Some favored shooting; others wanted them strung up to the nearest tree; while one sanguine borderman declared that they should be sunk to the bottom of the river with stones fastened about their necks.

It was a rather cold-blooded procedure for civilized men, no doubt; but the blunt but honest frontiersmen felt that the scoundrels before them richly deserved the most horrible fate.

The question was left for Iowa Jack to decide, and the trapper chose the second course.

"Shootin' 's too good fur 'em," he declared, grimly, "an' it won't do ter p'ison ther water with their infernal carcasses. They're a disgrace ter ther tree they swing from, but I opine ther tree 'll hev ter bear ther infliction."

The captives heard their fate in dogged silence.

They knew full well the uselessness of asking for mercy. That which they had refused to others, they could not well hope for themselves.

At this juncture, Little Lightfoot stepped forward.

"Afore you proceed with your amusement, pards," he said, "I want ter say a word about this hyar Injun. I know a thing or two about this same White Rattlesnake, and I reckon I kin give you a leetle surprise."

As he spoke, the young ranger advanced to the side of the prostrate chief, and rubbed his face vigorously with a dampened piece of cloth.

The effect was startling. The copper color disappeared as though by magic, and the lookers-on were amazed to see that White Rattlesnake was a white man.

With folded arms, the ranger stood enjoying the astonishment of his companions.

Amazement was depicted upon every face.

But the one most strongly affected by Little Lightfoot's startling disclosure was Philip Lester.

As his eyes fell upon the face of the metamorphosed chief, he recoiled as though confronted by a specter.

The next moment he started forward with a loud cry.

"At last, Simon Randall, we meet again," he exclaimed. "Where, you villain, is the child you stole from me? Where is my boy?"

A brief explanation at this point will not be amiss.

Twenty years before the date of our narrative, Philip Lester, then a young man, resided in a quiet New England town, and one of his acquaintances was Simon Randall.

The two had been rivals from early boyhood in sports and studies, and now, when they had reached the age of manhood, both fell in love with the same girl; the suit resulted in favor of Lester, for the maiden was sensible enough to see the difference in the characters and temperaments of the two young men.

The feeling of rivalry on the part of Simon now ripened into bitter hatred, but he took his defeat coolly, and soon after left the town.

Three years passed, during which time twins came to bless the home of Philip Lester; then Simon Randall suddenly turned up, only to disappear again the next day, and with him went the boy Lionel, a bright little fellow of two summers.

Skilled detectives were employed by the

agonized father to search for his child, but to no purpose.

The abductor was tracked to the frontier, but here all traces of him were lost; and Lester, after a vain expenditure of time and money, gave up the quest in despair.

And now, after many years, Lester suddenly came upon his old enemy in the guise of a Sioux chieftain.

Eagerly, excitedly, he addressed him, while White Rattlesnake met his anxious inquiries with cool indifference.

"You ask for your son, Philip Lester," he said, indifferently. "I can tell you this: your boy is at this moment alive and well."

"Do you speak the truth, man?" cried the settler, excitedly. "Where is he? For Heaven's sake, man, speak out!"

For several moments the white chief was silent; it was evident that a tumult was going on in his mind. Finally he looked up.

"Philip Lester," he exclaimed, impressively, "I have wronged you deeply, but now that I'm near the end of my rope, I am going to atone to you. My goose is cooked, I know, and what's the use of leaving the world with a secret that will do me no further good to keep?"

"As I said before, your boy is alive and well. When I came here, I joined the Sioux, keeping the youngster with me. He grew up with the children of the tribe, but several years ago escaped from us to the settlement, and from that time to this he has been a continual thorn in my side. It is to him, in fact, that I owe my present position."

"Philip Lester, you seek your son. Behold him standing by your side—Little Lightfoot, the ranger! He is your son!"

As this startling declaration fell from the lips of Randall, the entire party stood dumb with astonishment.

"If you doubt my statement, it is easily proved," the chief went on. "You know, as well as I, that on your son's left arm was a curiously-shaped scar caused by a burn. That mark should be there now."

A cry burst from the lips of the young ranger, as he pulled up the sleeve of his hunting-shirt, revealing a scar just as White Rattlesnake described it. The latter spoke the truth.

The next moment Philip Lester was warmly embracing the son from whom he had been separated so long.

It was a startling denouement for all concerned, and, as soon as they recovered from their astonishment, Little Lightfoot received the congratulations of his trapper friends.

The most surprised of them all was the young ranger, himself; he could scarcely believe it possible that he was Lester's son and the twin brother of Louise.

When the excitement had somewhat abated, White Rattlesnake beckoned Little Lightfoot to his side.

"Boy," he exclaimed, "my time here is short, for them cursed friends of yours'll make short work of me. I have wronged you, I'll allow, but it would do me good to know that you cherish no ill-will toward me on that account. I fancy I could pass out easier, after grasping your hand and hearing you say that I am forgiven."

Little Lightfoot was too generous to refuse the request. In perfect good faith he loosened the thong that pinioned the chief's arms, and assisted him to a sitting posture, at the same time frankly extending his hand.

A gleam of triumph shot into the eyes of the treacherous chieftain, as he grasped, not the hand of the youth, but the hilt of the knife protruding from his belt, with which he dealt a swift, vicious blow.

The movement was executed with lightning-like rapidity, and Little Lightfoot, taken completely by surprise, staggered back with a cry of alarm, the blood spurting from a wound in his side.

The next instant Iowa Jack's pistol spoke spitefully, and Samuel Randall sunk back with a shattered arm.

With cries of mingled anger and alarm, the entire party crowded around the ranger.

Little Lightfoot waved them back, an assuring smile upon his lips.

"Only a flesh wound, friends," he said. "I jumped back just in time, and it's no fault of his that that steel didn't go deeper. Ther p'izen varmint! He pretended to repent, jest for ther sake of getting a final whack at me."

White Rattlesnake cursed furiously when he saw that his last trick had failed—that his hated young foe still lived to triumph over him.

"You 'tarnal snake!" cried Iowa Jack, indignantly. "I reckon you've lived long enuff."

And within five minutes what remained of Simon Randall and his colleague, Black Raven, dangled from the nearest limb, a grim example of border justice.

Next morning the party of whites took their departure from the island which had been the scene of such desperate adventures, leaving the bodies of their foes to the mercy of the vultures.

After a brief journey, they reached Eagle Bluffs in safety.

Rejoicing in the recovery of his long-lost son, Philip Lester settled down in peace and content; Guy Garland did not return to the East for obvious reasons, and a year later he led handsome Louise to the altar. At the same time, Little Lightfoot linked his fortunes with those of a pretty settler's daughter.

Unmolested by the Indians, Eagle Bluffs grew and thrived, and its inhabitants were soon on the royal road to prosperity.

Lionel Lester is an old man now, but he loves to relate to his grandchildren, as they climb upon his knee, tales of the stirring times when he was known as Little Lightfoot, the Boy Ranger.

THE END.

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